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Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Building a House?”
Text: Matthew 7:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

No one sets out to build a house that's going to fall down. No one sets out to build a house whose basement will flood when it rains, or which will get infested by termites, or have its roof ripped off when high winds come. No one builds a house near a hill expecting it to get buried by a mud slide, or on the sea shore expecting it to get washed away by a hurricane, or on a fault line expecting an earthquake to shake it down, or in the woods expecting a forest fire to burn it to the ground. But all those things happen, don't they? Nobody wants them to! But they do. Everyday.

And the same is true of our spiritual lives. No one sets out to believe in something they *know* is wrong! No one knowingly sets out to build a spiritual house on a foundation of sand. False prophets don't set out to be false prophets. No child tells his parents, “*You know Mom and Dad, when I grow up I'm going to be a false teacher and lead many people astray!*” No one sets out to build a house that's going to fall down! But it happens, doesn't it? There are false teachers, false prophets, false churches, and false religions. And while they may look good for a while, and have a nice view, and be in a good location, and be popular and attractive, they are fraught with danger. And when the storms and winds and earthquakes and floods and fires and temptations and doubts and fears of this life come blowing and beating down upon them, they will not and can not stand. They will fall, and great will be the fall of them.

Two houses. Two foundations. Two ways. Two very different endings. In the Holy Gospel this morning, this is how Jesus ends His Sermon on the Mount. He has just laid out for all the Word of God and the wisdom of God. From the Beatitudes to the fulfilling of the Law to the Lord's Prayer to faith to love to living the Christian life. A more jam-packed sermon I don't think there could ever be! And at the end, two ways. *What's it gonna be? Who will you believe?* This wisdom and teaching of God, or the wisdom and teaching of the world? What foundation will be holding your life up?

Now by presenting that alternative, Jesus is not asking for us to make a *decision* – at

least, not the way it's so commonly presented today. *That it's all up to you.* You have to decide where you going to build your spiritual house, your spiritual life. You have to make a decision for Jesus and invite Him into your life. As if we had the power within us to choose Jesus and His way at all! Because the truth is that if you can pray that prayer and ask Jesus to come into your heart, He's already there! He's the One who has given you the faith to do that! It did not come from you. . . . But many believe that very thing – that it is something that they did – and once you believe that, your focus tends to stay on the fact that your spiritual life is something that you do. And your focus then becomes building a better house. And so I'll pray more and I'll give more and I'll work more and I'll live better and I'll have such a strong Christian life that no storms in this world will ever be able to knock this house down! And not only individual Christians sometimes think that way, but even whole churches and Synods! That the devil may have been able to knock my house down before, but by golly, I'll make sure He can't do it again!

You know, the people who build houses think that too. After a tornado, or a hurricane, or a flood, building codes become stronger, new techniques are used, better materials are selected . . . and those new houses may be strong and stand for a while. *But you know what's gonna happen, don't you?* Age will break down even the best construction. If there's even one corner or weak spot the builders missed, the whole house is vulnerable. And then there is always the storm no one expected. The *once in a lifetime storm*, that these days seems to be coming more and more frequently. And no matter how good that house was built, it falls, and great is the fall of it.

That's why when Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount, He didn't talk about the building of the house. He didn't mention building better, or stronger. He didn't point to the quality of the workmanship. That's what we tend to focus on – what *we* do! . . . But just as with houses, the devil knows how to break us down over time. Oh, maybe we'll do alright and look good for a while. But he is very persistent, to wear you down and wear you out. He'll take advantage of those weak spots in your life – ones you didn't even know were there! And he is always ready to send your way a storm that is stronger than you could ever have imagined. And the truth is, you can't build strong enough to stand against him. He is too strong. He is too devious. He is too much for you.

And Jesus knows that. He knows our enemy – and what he is capable of – better than we do. And so Jesus doesn't talk about building better – He points to only one thing: **the foundation**. For that's what the whole Sermon on the Mount has been about! It is not about what *we* do, but what Jesus has done, and is doing, for us and in us. And on that foundation, the right foundation, we are safe and secure. *All other ground is sinking sand.* (LW 368) And I would think the devil takes particular delight in knocking down those strongly built, grand, spiritual mansions that were built on sand!

*So why do people do it? Why are we tempted to do it? Why do they rebuild their house on the seashore after a hurricane has knocked it to the ground? Why on a fault line after it has been destroyed by an earthquake? Maybe they think it won't happen again. Maybe the scenic views and location and money they can earn are just too good. And those priorities become more important than the foundation. . . . It happens spiritually too. Even to the best of us! We want the good views and success and popularity. We want people to like us, and so don't say anything controversial. Let's all just get along; agree to disagree. Maybe we want preaching that makes us feel good, and tells us we're doing okay. Keep up the good work! . . . But if those things are our priorities and therefore become our foundation – instead of faithfulness and truth – what happens when the storms come? *And they will always come.* When emotions change, and what's popular changes, and people change and let you down, that foundation washes away. Maybe it happens all at once; maybe it erodes little by little. But it will fall, and great will be the fall of it.*

But there is a foundation that cannot be shaken. A foundation not based on emotion or size or popularity or feelings or success. *Although those things may all be there, they are not the foundation.* **The foundation is the person and work of Jesus Christ.** The Son of God come down from Heaven, incarnate of the virgin Mary, crucified, dead, and buried, and then the third day risen from the dead, and ascended into Heaven. That foundation is rock solid because it is not based upon anything you have done, or must do, or promise to do – but has been done **for you.**

That foundation is rock solid. It is the **rock** of Golgotha into which Jesus' cross was driven. It is the **rock** that was rolled away from the tomb showing us that our Saviour had risen and conquered death. It is the **rock** upon which Jesus says ***He will build His Church, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail*** (Mt 16:18). . . . And it is upon this **rock** foundation that you are being built. And not with the *sands* of emotion, but with the **rock** of His Word – the foundation of the prophets and the apostles (Eph 2:20). Not with the *sands* of what you do, but with the **rock** of what He does for you, His Baptism, His Supper, His Absolution, binding you to your foundation and He to you. . . . He is the **rock** upon which Jacob laid His head in sleep (Gen 28), and which we can lay our heads upon in the sleep of death in peace. He is the **rock** which gives living water in the wilderness of sin (Num 20; 1 Cor 10), and as we sang in the Introit, He is our **rock** of refuge (Ps 31), no matter what this life may bring.

And while the world in its wisdom thinks this foundation foolish and weak (1 Cor 1) – for how can confession and forgiveness, humility and love, a little water and a morsel of bread and wine, and old fashioned, outdated words read and preached by a pastor who's

not even as smart as we are, *do such great things?* Although this may all look foolish and weak, this is the only foundation that will last. And not only for this life, but for eternity. *For it is the foundation of Christ crucified.* A rock which is a stumbling block to many, but the chief cornerstone to those who believe (1 Pt 2).

This is the rock you have been put upon and that you are being built upon. For it is not you doing the building, but Christ. It is His house, His Church. If you want to build your own house, He does not force you to stay. If the grass is greener on another foundation, you may go and build there. The nice views and the green grass and the promises of an easy and successful life seduce many; they're more comfortable to lie on than a hard rock! But they are the calm before the storm. Whatever you build cannot last. What Christ builds will last into eternity. And so, Jesus said, ***“In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”*** (Jn 14:2) You see, that's why Jesus didn't talk about our building work – because He is the builder. And what exactly is Jesus building there? Not a physical house, but a spiritual one. His Church. And He is building it through His foolish-sounding and weak-looking Word and Sacraments. And when it is complete, He will come again. And in the end, it will be the only house left standing. The only house that can withstand the devil's storms and assaults. For it is the house built on the body and blood of Jesus. On the heel of the One who crushed the devil head. Who crushed his big mouth – his big, fat, lying, murderous mouth, which got us into this mess in the first place!

And we are built on that foundation when we stop trying to build ourselves, and instead live in Him. Living in Him as we live in His Word, as Moses said: ***laying up these words in our hearts and in our souls, and binding them as a sign on our hands, and between our eyes, and teaching them to our children.*** Living in Him as we live in repentance and confession, as Paul said: ***what becomes of our work and boasting? It is excluded. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works.*** And living in Him as His Word lives in us, as Jesus said: ***everyone who hears these words of mine and does them.*** And that means not just following the commandments, but His words which say: baptize; teach; take and eat; pray; hear; believe.

For built on this Word, we are built not on what we do (which is shaky and uncertain at best!), but on what He has done – on His love and forgiveness. The forgiveness promised to the believers in the Old Testament, the forgiveness accomplished by Jesus in His death and resurrection, and the forgiveness now given to us through the Holy Spirit. With that Word and promise as your foundation, the storms of this life cannot destroy you. The storms of fear and doubt and anxiety and even death can blow and beat against that foundation all they like – and in fact, they did when Jesus hung on the cross! But they could not win. And they still cannot. Jesus' victory is a victory for all time, and the

victory that He has promised to give to you.

So as we enter into the long Pentecost season, with its focus on the Christian life and faith, we begin today with the foundation. For there really is only one. **On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.