

BUILDING ON A SOLID FOUNDATION – Sermon for September 12/13, 2009

When someone wants to build a building, he looks for a place that is suitable and then has soil tests to determine the type of ground it is so he can determine if the building he is building will stand. If the ground itself will not support the building, he may consider driving pylons into the ground to give the structure stability. If there is solid rock, he knows he can build his structure.

You may recognize her name: Joni Erickson Tada. She was a lively, athletic young woman, a 17 year old high school senior when she suffered a terrible accident. She was swimming in Chesapeake River near her home one day when she dove into the river, hitting her head on a rock, and broke her neck. For over 35 years, she's been a quadriplegic, unable to use her arms or legs and dependent on a wheelchair. I can't imagine what she must have felt like, facing such a catastrophe so early in life.

As a teenager Joni had professed faith in Christ, she believed the right things, but they didn't seem to really effect how she lived. She tells how, at 17, she was already checking out a local birth control clinic because she assumed she'd be sleeping with her boyfriend when she got to college. Looking back, she says, it's clear her life was headed down a dangerous, destructive path. Then, her life caved in on her. The terrible accident came.

In her best selling autobiography, Joni, she talks about the dark period right after her accident. There were 2 years of hospitalization and grueling rehab. She begged her friends to help her commit suicide, and when they refused, she struggled to find some way to do it herself. It's easy to see how she could have retreated to a life of anger or bitterness, given up on God and given up on life.

Joni, kept one Bible passage as her focal point, a passage from 2 Corinthians, that reads, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness."

She didn't give up. Today, hers is an outstanding life of consistent, fruitful Christian witness and service. She's an internationally known advocate for the disabled. What was it that made the difference? What saved her broken life and literally helped her re-build it so wonderfully? How can anyone weather such a catastrophic storm in life?

Returning from exile, the people of Israel began rebuilding the temple, as in accordance to King Cyrus' decree. ***“Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD... they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD”*** (Ezra 3:10-11).

That reminds me of our foundation, something we've been seeking to firmly establish here at Bethany Lutheran Church. ***“For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”*** (1 Corinthians 3:11). What joy to see Jesus become the foundation of another life. Yet the temple of God, that is our body, was not yet built when opposition came.

Cynthia was a Latina student at a college in New York. She struggled with fitting in and living her Christian life. Peer pressure was great and oftentimes she did not participate in church.

She said, **“Lately I feel so distant from God. I serve in church, but seem to just go through the motions. I haven't felt anything in a long time. I'm being influenced by my friends and I feel guilty for being a bad witness to them. I'm unsure about God's forgiveness,”** Cynthia told Melina Mendez, InterVarsity staff at Hunter College in New York. Cynthia serves as a youth leader and translator in her church.

Cynthia joined a Bible study with other Latina students to learn more about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. As they studied God's character and grace Cynthia told her small group, **“Through InterVarsity God has solidified the foundations of my Christian faith. I want to truly live a life that is all about God. I have realized that even though I have a lot of things going on in my life, college can definitely be a place where I can find God, take time to praise him, and share the Gospel message of Christ with those around me.”** Cynthia is committed to serving the InterVarsity community at Hunter College and excited about ministering to her fellow students as a Bible study leader this semester.

Cynthia's story can be similar to ours. We face similar challenges – feeling distant from God, just going through the motions at Church, influenced by friends and peers, being a bad witness to my friends, or understanding the difference between hearing and doing.

We have similar challenges out in the world – temptations, being victimized by the economic situation, dealing with politics and moral issues and finances and the list goes on and on.

As you know, we have core values here. #1 is Jesus Christ is the only Lord and Savior and #2 is The Bible-God's word- is the foundation for our thinking and doing. We believe that the Bible-God's word- is the only sufficient foundation on which to build your life.

Of course, if you're in the market for life foundation material today, there are a lot of choices. You might choose to build your life on raising a good, strong family, leaving behind you children and grandchildren who will make the world a better place, and we rightly honor that. Or you might build your life on the foundation of serving the community and human kind with all your energies. If so, we rightly honor that. Or you might choose to build on the foundation of serving the church--whenever the doors are open you're there and we certainly honor that. These are all good things—commendable goals---but they're meant to be the “top floors” in the building of your life, not the foundation. They aren't strong enough to withstand the storms of life; the catastrophic accidents, the terrible diseases, the disappointments and the tragic losses that come to us all. If our lives and our dreams and efforts are to have lasting significance, they've got to be built on another, stronger foundation. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who builds his house on rock”, Jesus said. “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

The Bible is the foundation of our thinking AND doing. It's not enough to read and study the bible and think correctly about it. That's a good start but even that's not enough. Joni Erickson had been raised in the faith. She knew what the bible taught but at 17 and unmarried she was preparing to sleep with her boyfriend. Hearing but not doing—that's foolish, Jesus says. A life built on a solid foundation must link inseparably both knowing God's word and doing it

Hearing and Doing—keeping those two linked together--that's been a problem for God's people from day#1. You can sense the frustration in the Lord's voice in this passage I read from the prophet Ezekiel. “My people come, some come eagerly, to hear my word through the prophet but then they go out and they do not obey. They hear my words but won't act on them. Their professions of concern for my ways are just empty words! Their prayers were a lot of hot air!”

Satan influences our lives by enticing us to trust his ways as if they are a solid foundation on which we are to build. He does his work ever so slyly, like this story reminds us.

I heard a story about a woman—it could have been a man but in this case it was a woman—who was out driving one day. She pulled up to a light that had just turned green. She noticed that the man in the car in front of her was talking on his cell phone and shuffling some papers. He was clearly not paying attention to the light.

Of course, she wanted to get through the light before it turned red so she began to yell at the man and pound on her steering wheel, hoping to get him moving before the light turned. He didn't move—still on his phone. She's having a fit, and yelling and finally the light turns yellow. She blasts her horn. He looks up, zips through the intersection and leaves her there—stuck at the red light. She's livid—cursing and screaming and pounding on her steering wheel. Then she hears a policeman knock on her window. His gun is drawn and he motions for her to get out of the car and keep her hands where he can see them. She's dumbfounded, but obeys. She “assumes the position” is handcuffed, put in the back of the patrol car and taken to the station. What could she have done? She was only sitting at a red light?

At the station, she's photographed, fingerprinted, booked and put in a cell. After a couple hours, the policeman comes back, opens the cell, takes her up front, gives her back her personal items and tells her she is free to go. “I'm so very sorry for the mistake”, he said. “I really am, but there you were cursing and screaming and I saw your licensed plate holder said “Choose Life”. I noticed your bumper sticker said “Follow me to Sunday School” and you had a metal Christian fish bumper sticker on your hood, so I thought for sure you must have stolen the car!” Hearing AND doing God's word. They're inseparable in building a strong foundation in life.

If we want to build our lives on the solid foundation, we look to building on what the church is built on - on God's Word. It's clear that we need to be “people of God who read, study, learn, and live the Word of God, people who read God's Word and soak it in, we listen to it and then, as God leads, we do it. That's how to build our lives on a strong, lasting foundation. Otherwise we build our house on sinking sand, like this sand castle. When the storms come, the waters rise and destroy the house.

I commend to you again the practice of building your house on a solid foundation, the Rock of Jesus Christ. We look to the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior and know that our future home is with Him. This is on what we build our life.

Some tools to help are: a small group –disciples for life or one of our adult Sunday Nurture classes for example- a group where you can help each other live out—act on—what you discover in God’s word. If you can’t find just the right group, start one! Work together with others who are building that same strong foundation. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock”.

That’s what Joni Erickson did. Today, she’s Joni Erickson Tada, married 21 years. In her mid-50’s now, she’s written best selling books and has a daily radio show on 850 stations around the country. She testifies before Congress and travels world wide as an advocate for the disabled.

She’s also a very successful Christian businesswoman, the head of Joni and Friends. Last year, her ministry provided weekend retreats for nearly 3000 disabled folks and their families and 20,000 wheelchairs to disabled folks in third world countries. It takes her two hours and lots of help to get ready to go to work each day but she does--and her life today is as fruitful and productive as any I know.

There are people right here in this congregation who have faced storms just as severe as Joni Erickson’s. They made the same choice to build their lives on the foundation of God’s word and their lives show the same strength and fruitfulness. Their lives are a challenge and example for you and me. The storms of life will come. Will we be ready? “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who builds his house on sand.” What foundation are you building on?

Joni Erickson’s life, Cynthia’s life, and this little parable about the wise and foolish builders have some thing significant to teach us about the stewardship of life. If you went to Sunday School as a child, you probably learned this parable. You may have sung the little song about the wise man who built his house on the rock and the rains came down and the floods came up. It’s a short and simple parable but one that Jesus used to communicate an important message: Life brings storms. They come to everyone— and some can be real hurricanes! If you build

your life on the foundation of hearing and doing God's word, you can survive those storms—it may not be easy, but you can survive them.