

**What we stand on**  
**Matthew 7:24-27**  
**March 4 2018**

Two nights ago, Friday night,  
 a whole lot of us — including a whole lot of you —  
 gathered in the Memorial Room for the annual ‘Evening for Appalachia’,  
 raising the money to send 300 of us to West Virginia this summer.  
 So I’ve got the Appalachia trip on my mind this weekend —  
 and I’ve got an Appalachia trip story to tell you,  
 one that has something to do with the Jesus parable that Ellen just read.

Waaay back when, in the summer of 1993,  
 fellow Greenfield Hiller Heath Smith and I teamed up to lead one of the nine work crews  
 that we took to West Virginia that year.

Nine crews was a big deal for us –  
 little did we know that a couple decades later we’d be taking 45!  
 It was Heath’s first trip, and she was nervous,  
 but I assured her that with me as a partner, she need not worry.

*Right.*

The home that our work crew was assigned to had had a room built onto it out of scrap  
 lumber, to serve as a bedroom for the children of the family.

And for its foundation, they’d set pieces of tree trunk directly on the ground.  
 Over the years those tree trunks had rotted, so now the room was collapsing .  
 We were asked to take the whole thing down,  
 and to build a new foundation, for a new room, and then get to work framing out that  
 room.

The ASP staff person in charge of overseeing us was,  
 by coincidence, a former SPF kid from right here,  
 and he had some personal experience with my building expertise.  
 He was therefore a little worried.

“Alida,” he said, “are you sure you can do a foundation?”

“Please, Andy,” I said, “I’ve been on this trip three times already!”

Of course I had no clue, but God forbid I publicly admit weakness.

So, with everyone on my crew confident in my knowledge,  
 they all got to work tearing down the existing room  
 while I ducked behind a tree with the ASP construction manual,  
 and frantically read the chapter on Foundations.  
 It was actually reassuring, because it did not appear to be difficult:

you dig some holes, put concrete in them, stick some cinderblocks on top, build a room. I returned to Heath and the crew, full of confidence.

"All right, folks", I said, "we need eight holes and I think they should go right about *here*. And here and here and here."

The crew dutifully dug eight holes, toiling away in the 95 degree heat. We're talking digging through clay and rock, two feet down. Not so much fun.

The next day Andy came to inspect.

I sensed an issue.

"Alida," he said, "I don't know how to tell you this, but -- these holes are all in the wrong place.

You gotta move them a foot."

You can't actually move holes, you know.

You can't just pick up a hole and put it somewhere else --

a fact which was not lost on my crew,

who looked ready to dig a hole for *me* at that point.

But we moved the holes, which is to say we dug 'em again.

The next day Andy and Heath and I looked at them again.

Something was still not right.

"I think a foot was too far," I said.

"Huh," said Andy, "Yeah, you're right."

My crew, surely the most patient teenagers on God's green earth, collectively swallowed hard, and got to work. Moving holes.

On Thursday, with the week almost at an end,

we were finally ready to mix and pour concrete.

We dumped a bag of concrete mix into a big tub, and poured in the water.

"Looks kinda like playdough," said one of the kids.

"Alida, can we just use our hands to mix it?"

"I don't see why not!" I said.

Well, one real good reason *why not* is that concrete mix is made with just enough acid to burn the top layer of skin off.

It took two large boxes of bandaids to cover all the blisters on seven people's hands.

Friday morning, the last day -- blistered, weary, and sunburned,

we headed out to the work site, realizing that we were not going to be framing out a nice new room;

next week's crew would have that fun.

All we would have done was this blankety-blank foundation.

We arrived at the home and piled out of the van.  
 The concrete, we noticed with pleasure, looked great –  
 neat and square and evenly leveled off.  
 Slowly and *carefully* the crew began to build up eight little cinderblock towers  
 on our eight little concrete pads,  
 checking and leveling, checking and leveling.  
 Finally we were done.  
 Eight foundation piers, lined up perfectly with each other, neatly squared, solidly built,  
 ready to hold up the Taj Mahal if need be.  
 We stood and stared with pride.  
 "Wow," said one of the kids finally. "That's beautiful."  
 And it was, it really was.  
 And suddenly we didn't care if someone else got to build the room because we knew  
 that with blood, sweat and tears – literally –  
 we had built the world's greatest foundation.  
 And when all was said and done, we'd built it just right.

Heath, amazingly, didn't quit this church — *[she usually sits right there at the 10:30 service]*.

And I soon thereafter moved myself into more of a managerial role for the ASP trip.

So the story Jesus told his followers, the story Ellen just read to you,  
 was all about good foundations.

He gathered his friends around him one day and he told a little parable,  
 about one guy who wisely built his house on rock  
 and another guy who decided to go with sand.

That man who built on rock, Jesus said,  
 that's what you are when you listen to what I've taught you.

When you take what I say and do it,  
 when you act in compassion and live with love,  
 you're like someone who's chosen to build their house  
 on concrete, poured into holes dug deep and carefully in just the right place,  
 on piers of cinderblocks set meticulously with levels.

And when the winds blow, said Jesus,  
 or the rivers rise, or the storms come, that house is not shaken.

Because the foundation was right.

The person who believes in me, and lives in love, and acts in compassion is set.

Is *set*.

They are standing on rock, and life is never going to shake them loose.

What we do on the Appalachia trip – really, *always* – is to work on foundations. Sure, yes, literal foundations: holes dug into West Virginia clay and concrete poured in just the right place, and blocks laid level.

Yes, those foundations.

But more than that, so much more than that.

We work on the foundations Jesus was talking about: about remembering what we stand on and stand for, about who it is that holds us up and keeps us steady and makes the lives that we’re building straight and right and true. About a Love beyond and beneath all loves, that calls *us* to love. We use a week of building houses to build our own foundations of integrity and compassion and faith and hope and trust.

The great Len Morgan, who led the trip with me for many years, often said “you know, we’re not just building homes, Alida — we’re building kids.”

To which I would add — after several decades of witnessing it — we’re not just building kids, we’re building adults.

All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this is not actually a sermon about the Appalachia trip.

Or not *just* about the Appalachia trip, anyway.

The truth is, we’re all here, here in this church, to strengthen our foundations.

The same foundation that I just talked about: a foundation made of integrity and compassion and faith and hope and trust. The foundation that Jesus was talking about.

Over in the Len Morgan Youth Barn, where our kids meet for Confirmation and YPF and JPF and SPF,

there are posters that hang on the wall — some of them pretty tattered and worn from having been hung up by me years ago.

They have messages about respect and courage and positivity and kindness.

And one of them says this:

If you know what you stand for, you limit what you’ll fall for.

Which is really just another of saying:

watch your foundation.

So what do we stand for here?

What we stand **on**:

The love of Christ — unconditional, inclusive, welcoming.  
 The compassion of God for all who are hurting.  
 The justice that rolls down like waters, God’s righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,  
 quenching the thirst of all who seek mercy.  
 That’s we stand on,  
 that’s the rock that Jesus asked us to build our very selves on.

Parents often say to me, when they bring their children here  
 for baptism, for Sunday School, for confirmation —  
 they say “I want to give them a foundation.”  
 That **is** what this church is here for.  
 But not just for kids — All of us need the foundation.  
 All of us need to feel the rock beneath us.  
 We need to be reminded what is right and true  
 and what is love and what is living.  
 We need to discover what’s worth building  
 and what’s worth standing on and standing for.  
 We need to remember that we are loved and called to love,  
 forgiven and called to forgive,  
 embraced and called to embrace.

Yesterday, down the hill at St. Pius church,  
 hundreds and hundreds gathered to say goodbye to a man who was dear to this  
 community, dear to many of you,  
 dear to David and me.  
 Dan Caruso — the honorable Judge Daniel Caruso,  
 was one of the most compassionate and faith-filled people I have ever known —  
 and those two qualities were entirely interwoven.  
 His depth of compassion came from the depth of his faith.  
 His life was built on the solid foundation of Christ’s love for him,  
 and he daily sought ways to offer that love to others.  
 There are thousands of stories in this town of times when Dan Caruso showed up to help,  
 listened with respect, judged with wisdom,  
 quietly cared for another child of God.  
 Because to him, each person was a child of God.  
 As Father John Baran put it:  
*Dan knew and loved the lives of so many in this town.*  
 Because his own life was built on rock:  
 he knew what he stood for,  
 he knew who he was.  
 He knew Whose he was.

And for that he was cherished, and for that he will be profoundly missed.

Hear my words and live them, Jesus said.

Hear my love and live it.

Build with faith,

a life which no river will overtake,

a house on rock which nothing will shake loose.

Amen.