

MASTER BUILDERS
 Luke 6:39-42, 46-49; 1 Corinthians 3:1-17
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 First Mennonite Church
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Home inspections are in the news. This week, a non-profit research group released the first study to assess the health and safety of homes in U.S. metropolitan areas. The findings indicate that at least one in three homes have major problems like water leaks, peeling paint, holes, rodents, and mold. An official with the Department of Housing and Urban Development called the study “a wake-up call,” saying “You can’t be healthy if your house is sick.”¹

Having a well-built and well-maintained dwelling is a quality of life indicator. In the Bible, the image is employed to illustrate the quality of one’s spiritual life. Jesus tells a parable about house construction to show the importance of constructing sturdy lives of faith. As is typical for parables, there is a dramatic contrast between the house that withstands the pounding flood waters and the house that falls immediately into great ruin when the river bursts against it.²

We believers are the house. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul says to the faith community, you are God’s building (3:9) and a several verses later, “God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (3:17)

Could we pass inspection today? Are we whole and holy? Or are there some leaks? (And no, this is not a comment on the efforts of our Property & Finance Committee!)

It’s tempting to concentrate on the how-it-appears-to-the-world aspects of a building or remodeling project. The person who doesn’t spend time and energy on the foundation and infrastructure may have a nice looking house on the outside. Yet what is flimsy and superficial can’t withstand a serious challenge.

Remember the folktale of the three little pigs? They leave home to make their way in the world. The first one builds a house of straw. The straw house is easy to make, but it is also easily blown down by the big bad and very hungry wolf, which then wastes no time devouring the pig. The second pig builds a house of sticks. What happens to the stick house and the second little pig? Right!

The third pig builds a house of hard bricks. The brick house proves strong enough to withstand the wolf’s huffing and puffing. This folk tale presents a practical moral about making the effort to do things well. Unfortunately, the pig siblings don’t share building

¹Wendy Koch, “Study: 1 in 3 homes in metro areas could pose health risks,” *USA Today*, September 24, 2009, 2A.

² Luke 6:46-49. Compare with Job 22:15-16: “Will you keep to the old way that the wicked have trod? They were snatched away before their time; their foundation was washed away by a flood.”

tips, although in some versions the two brothers flee the wolf and take refuge in the wise pig's brick house.

This folktale was popular in my childhood home. You see, we moved into a newly constructed brick house when I was six years old. Brick is best, I heard my parents say on many occasions. And we had a basement that could serve as a tornado shelter and potential bomb shelter, in the event..... Of course, this was all framed purely in practical, down-to-earth terms.

However, today's Scripture texts use practical terms to point to spiritual matters.

A skilled master builder is careful to lay a good foundation. Describing himself as a master builder, Paul emphasizes that the foundation for believers is Jesus Christ and there can be no other foundation—"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11).

Paul planted the church in Corinth by sharing the story and teachings of Jesus. The new believers heard the words. They took in the milk of the story. They were baptized. But they have not yet integrated the teachings into their lives. Paul struggles mightily in his letter to the Corinthians, seeking to secure their loyalty to Christ while admonishing them for divisions caused by immature jealousy, quarreling, and rivalry. One painful rivalry concerns the two missionary evangelists Apollos and Paul himself. People in the church are aligning themselves with one or the other of these preachers and teachers, defining themselves in terms of being their disciples rather than disciples of Jesus.

In response to this misplaced loyalty and destructive rivalry, Paul empathically describes Apollos and himself as co-workers, as one, as servants of God who can take no credit for the growth of faith, which comes from God. Paul is only able to lay the foundation of Jesus "by the grace of God" given to him (3:10).

What Paul calls "human" ways of thinking and acting (what we might label worldly ways)—boasting of personal achievement, fostering divisions, elevating one group by criticizing another, and so on, have no place in the church. The Christian mode should rather be humble, collaborative service that gives God the glory and makes caring provision for the most vulnerable.

I'm intrigued to place Jesus' parables in Luke 6 alongside the description of the early church's struggles in Corinth. The parable of the two houses makes it clear that calling Jesus "Lord" and giving superficial signs of allegiance are not sufficient. Jesus asks that we hear his words and do his words. This requires serious commitment—being grounded in Jesus' story and teaching and sustained by him. So the foundation image is apt. Believers who commit to following Jesus need a solid foundation. In the parable, the person digs and digs deep,³ gets down to the rock, and builds the house on the

³ Two separate Greek verbs are used to emphasize the kind and extent of digging, as the NET Bible notes: dug (*eskapsen*) and dug deep (*ebathunen*)."

bedrock. The rock is Jesus—the utterly dependable rock of ages. “No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I’m clinging,” we sing.⁴

Each person must choose and choose carefully how to build. Thankfully, in the church, construction help is readily available. Among Anabaptist Christians, there have been, and are, many master builders who like Paul remind us that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” In fact, that very verse was the motto of Menno Simons, leader of the early Anabaptist groups in Holland.

This fall, we are considering what it means to be Anabaptist Christians. Our experience of faith is not a passive receiving of teaching and tradition. To hear the good news—*really* to hear the Good News of Jesus—is to act on the teaching of Jesus and begin living in a new way, as transformed disciples of Jesus nurtured in the way of peace by a gathered community of faith.

When it comes to faith formation and being church, we don’t contract out the building project. This is a community build, a hands-on project. With the grace of God and empowered by the Spirit, we are responsible for equipping each other, choosing good design and building materials, and doing regular house inspections.

Two important tools for our church toolkit are suggested by today’s Scriptures. The first is a mirror [hold up and put in toolkit]. When Jesus counsels doing self-examination and critique before criticizing others, he uses a term from building construction. We are to remove the beam from our own eye, before worrying about the speck in the other’s eye (Luke 6:41-42). A beam is a big piece of lumber that helps define and support a structure. We need a healthy practice of self-examination to accompany the community practices of speaking peace we engaged last weekend.

The other tool is helping hands. We aid and encourage each other, like the cloud of witnesses cheering from the grandstand while the racers fix their eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12) and like the believers in Corinth learning to cooperate rather than selfishly compete over charismatic leaders, worship practices, and material goods [place joined people figures in toolkit] .

For some years, I taught a course on modern drama with a focus on the plays of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, who is considered the father of modern drama. One of Ibsen’s later plays is entitled *The Master Builder*. The main character, Halvard Solness, is nearing the end of his career as an architect and builder. He should be mentoring the talented young builder who certainly will take his place, but he finds it difficult to relinquish his ego and forego additional opportunities to burnish his reputation. A young female admirer, Hilde, identifies Solness as her hero and manipulates his vulnerable ego: “No one else but you should be allowed to build. You should go it alone. Do it all yourself.” This is just what Solness wants to hear. He fails to look in the mirror and pushes away his protégée rival. He sets himself up against

⁴ “My life flows on,” Hymnal #580.

God, refusing to give God the glory. In the end, Solness plunges to his death from the top of the spire he has climbed to claim the triumph of his new building.

This is what can happen when there is perceived to be only one master builder—and it isn't God! In the church, we have many master builders and many new believers and all of us are working together, aware that it is God who is at work in us, God who gives the growth, and God who gets the glory!

By now, I hope, many of you have had the opportunity to read the Palmer Becker pamphlet *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* (Mennonite Mission Network, 2008). The author covers a lot of ground and makes some sweeping generalizations that may fall harshly on the ears of those (like me) raised in other traditions.

Still, Becker offers three defining characteristics of the Anabaptist faith that are worth lifting up and connecting to our readings and to our congregational life:

- 1) Jesus is the center of our faith and discipleship is the expression of that faith.
- 2) Community is the center of our lives and community discernment helps us know God's will.
- 3) Reconciliation is the center of our work and through it people and relationships are transformed.

We will return to these three core values in story and song next Sunday.

What I want to leave you with this morning are some thoughts about how we Anabaptist believers build our house—that is, how we know and learn in our ongoing faith development, given these core values.

First, *we know and learn by doing*. Ours is an embodied faith of putting into practice what Jesus teaches.

Jesus: Hear my words and do them; build your house on my rock. Paul: Lay no other foundation but Jesus Christ.

Second, *we know and learn in community*. Our formation depends upon the opportunity to read the Scripture together, talk about our faith and challenges, and offer support, encouragement, and corrective in love.

Jesus: Love one another; where two or three or gathered in my name, I am with you.
Paul: Be one; co-workers for Christ.

Third, *we know and learn by renouncing* our individual wills, yielding our egos, and seeking and speaking the way of peace.

Jesus: You must lose your life to gain your life. Paul: It is not I who lives but Christ who lives in me

Last week at our church retreat we sang the song about Christ being under our feet—as well as before us and behind us and over us and within us and all around us.⁵ Indeed, as our house of faith is built, we experience ourselves dwelling with Jesus and Jesus dwelling with us.

“Indwelling” is one way of talking about the experience of discipleship, whereby we appropriate the habits and skills and attitudes that Jesus taught.⁶ “Dwelling in the Word” is a spiritual practice that brings the stories forward into the space among us for listening to the Spirit, listening to the Scripture, and listening to each other. This practice reminds us that Jesus is in our midst and that we seek above all to identify in a loving and vital way with the one sent from God, the one we cherish, our soul’s glory, joy, and crown.⁷

Amen.

⁵ “Peace before us,” *Sing the Story* #16.

⁶ Sara Wenger Shenk, *Anabaptist Ways of Knowing* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2003), 154.

⁷ “Fairest Lord Jesus,” Hymnal #117.