**Building on the Firm Foundation**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 3:11**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I’m not too bad at putting furniture together…that is, when it’s the stuff that you buy with all of the pieces pre-cut, all of the nuts and bolts that you need, and a *very* detailed set of instructions, all together in one box. Even then, Helen and I sometimes have to consult when the instructions are not quite clear. But together, with the help of a good set of instructions and the right materials, we get the job done.

That’s the way it works in the Church. Together, with good instructions and the right materials, we get the job done. At the end of last week’s scripture lesson, Paul underscores the importance of working together. “For we are God’s servants, working together,” he says in 1 Corinthians 3:9. In today’s scripture, beginning with 1 Corinthians 3:10, he talks about instructions and materials. He’s especially clear about the material, the *solid* material that forms the foundation of *anything* that we might want to build. He says, in verse 11, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Paul is clear about the foundation; about the material. His reference to instructions is more implicit, but if you read all of Paul’s letters, it becomes clear that the instructions for building, the blueprint for building, is the Word. “Don’t trust in your own wisdom,” he admonishes the Corinthians, “look to the wisdom of God.” Which is revealed right here; in the Bible.

We are servants in the Church, yes; servants called to follow a Master Plan; *God’s* plan. God has provided the blueprint in the Word, the foundation in Jesus Christ and the energy to build in the Holy Spirit, working through all of us, as we work together. Let’s examine each of these in turn.

The blueprint is the Word. John suggests as much in the prologue to his gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” he says (John 1:1). And the Greek word that he uses for Word is *Logos*, which can mean something like a blueprint; a blueprint for all of the Universe, for all of history, for all time, imagined by God in eternity, before the foundation of the world was laid. “The Word was in the beginning with God,” John goes on to say, “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:2-3). The Word is the blueprint for all that is.

So we have this blueprint which is the Word, and the Word is revealed through the words of scripture. A builder is in trouble if he works on a house without referring to the blueprint. And the Church is in trouble if it seeks to re-build without referring to the Word.

Which is one reason why the Elders have agreed to study a book called The Five Practices of Faithful Congregations. These are biblically-based practices which any congregation that hopes to move forward faithfully and effectively must be engaged in. The 5 practices are Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity. In other words, Welcoming, Worshipping, Growing, Serving and Giving. Scripture calls us to *welcome* the stranger; check out Hebrews 13:2. Scripture calls us to *worship* God with *joy*; see Psalm 100. Scripture calls us to drink spiritual milk so that we might *grow-up* to salvation; that’s the advice in 1 Peter 2:2. Scripture calls us to *serve* those in need and in so doing to serve the Christ; you could look that up in Mt. 25. Scripture calls us to *give back* to God the first fruits of all that God has given to us; the reference here is Proverbs 3:9-10. A church that does these things is following the blueprint for building the body of Christ. The blueprint is the Word.

And the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. The blueprint is the Word and Jesus is the foundation. No one can lay any foundation other than the One that God has already laid. “Christ is made the sure foundation,” says the old hymn. Christ is the answer to which all of our questions point. A minister was doing a children’s message once and she said, “I’m thinking of something that is furry, with long, floppy ears and a little pink nose that wiggles. Can anyone tell me what I’m thinking about?”

And a little boy said, “It sounds like a bunny rabbit, but I’m sure the answer is Jesus Christ.”

Okay, in that case the answer really was a bunny rabbit; but the *ultimate* answer to *all* of our questions is Jesus. For those who are lost he offers direction. For those who are lonely he offers absolute acceptance. For those who are plagued by guilt he offers forgiveness. And for those who are oppressed he offers justice. Jesus Christ is the same; yesterday, today and forever, scripture says (Hebrews 13:8). He is the foundation upon which the Church must build in this and every age.

Paul emphasized this point because he realized how easy it is to take your eyes off Jesus and follow some charismatic leader who may lead you astray. Some of the Corinthians viewed Paul as the one to follow. Others were quite taken by Paul’s colleague, Apollos. Still others felt that the man to follow was Peter (otherwise known as Cephas), who was becoming known as the leader of the Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. But these are just men, Paul says. *Good* men, but still just men. Lots of churches have made the mistake of putting stock in one particular minister. Years later they’ll look back on the leadership of Dr. So and So as being the glory days of the congregation, and no minister since then has ever measured up. In my home church in Chicago, that great leader was Dr. Ames. In this congregation, I’ve heard many of you speak very highly of Rev. Blackwood. And, yes, from what I’ve heard and read, Edward Schribner Ames and Grant Blackwood were great leaders. Many congregations have had many great leaders in days past. But each of those leaders has been merely a builder. The foundation upon which they all built is Jesus. And we need not despair about future leaders coming along because if we have the blueprint of the Word firmly in hand, and if we continue to build upon the firm foundation who is Jesus, good things will happen, even with a leader who is less then charismatic. But if we lose the blueprint and start to build on some other foundation, even the best leader is going to take the Church in the wrong direction.

The Word is the blueprint, Jesus Christ is the foundation and we…we are the builders; energized by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit binds us together as a community and gives us the passion to move ahead.

Last week, up at Bloomington-First Christian, Helen preached on the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 in Matthew’s gospel. As the week progressed and we reflected together on that passage and the passages around it, it became clear that the whole section of the Bible around that story is about the power of community, and the power of the Holy Spirit to do the seemingly impossible *through* a caring, faithful community. You remember the story: Jesus and his disciples have spent the day teaching and healing with a group of frightened, grieving, leaderless people, and at the end of the day they’re all hungry. There seems to be a just a wee bit of food for this multitude of people, but somehow, the disciples and Jesus manage to feed them all. Note that it’s not just Jesus who feeds the people, it’s Jesus *and the disciples* who feed them. *Together* they accomplish this important work. And they couldn’t do it without a community who *believed* in them; who *trusted* them. A chapter earlier Jesus was trying to do great things in Nazareth, his home town. But everyone there saw him as just the kid next door whom they watched grow-up: nobody special; just one of them. They didn’t see him as he really was; they didn’t see him as the Son of God; they didn’t *believe* in him. And Matthew says, “[Jesus] did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief” (Mt. 13:58). But go over to the next chapter and it’s a different story. Now there’s a community who *does* believe in him; a community who *trusts* him. They followed him all the way to some isolated spot on the Sea of Galilee because they knew that he had some answers for them. In their fear and confusion following the assassination of John the Baptist they looked to Jesus for direction, they looked to Jesus for answers, they believed in him. And within that community of belief – within that community of trust – there was *great* power. Jesus could do little in Nazareth but he could do great things on and around the Sea of Galilee. Because there he found a community of support. There he found the Holy Spirit *energizing* that community; *empowering* that community. The power of the Holy Spirit is *magnified* through the trust of the community. 5000 people were fed when it seemed like they had next to nothing in the way of food! I mean, if *that’s* not a deed of great power, I don’t know what is. And my hunch has always been that the food was there all along; horded away in peoples’ satchels. It took the leadership of Jesus, the teamwork of the disciples and the trust of the community for people to give generously with what they had. And where there seemed to be scarcity there was, instead, abundance.

Amazing things happen when people work together in community, building upon the foundation who is Jesus Christ. Which is why I’m optimistic about the future in this place. Because there’s something special happening here right now. Right here, in our midst, there’s something special happening. The Holy Spirit is moving. I can feel it whenever we’re gathered together for a meal. I can see it in your generosity. Many of us experienced it yesterday in the creative work that emerged from our planning retreat; in the buzz of energy that was present in that room. We are building together upon the firm foundation who is Jesus Christ, according to the blueprint that God has provided in the Word. The future is open. Anything can happen. Because we belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to God. And with God, all things are possible. Amen.