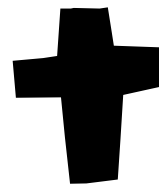




Bringing Home the Word



9TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME March 6, 2011

Checking Our Spiritual Foundations

By Diane M. Houdek

Last summer a freak rainstorm created serious flooding in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Numerous pictures in the local paper showed basement walls completely collapsed beneath the houses. The bricks of the foundations, perhaps not well-suited to the task, had given way after many years under this unexpected stress from the water. The houses were still precariously balanced above their flooded basements, but were no longer safe dwellings.

So it is with our spiritual lives. The story in today's Gospel is familiar to most people, at least in its outlines: the wise man who builds his house on bedrock and the foolish man who builds his on sand. One can even find

echoes of it in the story of the three little pigs, building houses that can't withstand the attacks of the big, bad wolf.

A closer look at this Gospel can give us greater insight into what Jesus is telling his listeners. He says that the wise ones are those who hear his words and put them into practice. We might build a life of prayer and spirituality that looks impressive, but if it's largely for show, then it will not sustain us in difficult times.

In the first reading, Moses tells the people to keep God's word always before them, in their minds and hearts. The practice of wearing phylacteries developed from these words, a somewhat literal interpretation of a spiritual concept. Like many of our own Catholic spiritual practices, these can be helpful physical reminders or they can be superficial actions that lose their connection to reality.

It's not enough to know what the gospel message says. It's not enough to use the right religious words ("those who say, 'Lord, Lord.'"). The test of our spiritual foundations is how we make those words real in our daily lives.

Just as most of us would avoid building a house that was clearly unsafe, so we generally avoid the big sins. Spiritual neglect builds up over time, however, and before we know it, we've lost our spiritual foundation.

The context of today's Gospel is sig-

nificant. It follows the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, arguably one of the more challenging sections in the four Gospels. Jesus has just turned the religious worldview of his listeners upside down. The 613 laws of the Torah were difficult, even impossible, to follow in all their particularities. Few were able to keep the law flawlessly. Some of the Pharisees developed many smaller rituals that would put what they called a "fence around the Torah." But often they became overly focused on the details.

Jesus takes a different approach. He goes for the heart of the commandments and suggests that it's not enough just to avoid the big sins. We must also strive to treat other—and in fact also regard them—as God would. Transgressions include not only murder, but anger; not only adultery but lust.

These are the words that form the undeniable foundation of our faith. If we are striving to behave according to the beatitudes and according to Jesus' command that we love one another, then our spiritual houses will be sound. If we are too focused on the externals, then there's a pretty good chance that our lives will get shaky when the inevitable and unavoidable storms hit. The upcoming season of Lent is the perfect time to examine our foundations and make any needed repairs. ✝

SUNDAY READINGS

Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32

Moses finds life in the word of God. He encourages the people to let God's word guide every thought and action.

Romans 3:21-25, 28

Paul emphasizes that we become righteous only by the grace of God. We become righteous by putting our faith in Jesus, not by works of the law.

Matthew 7:21-27

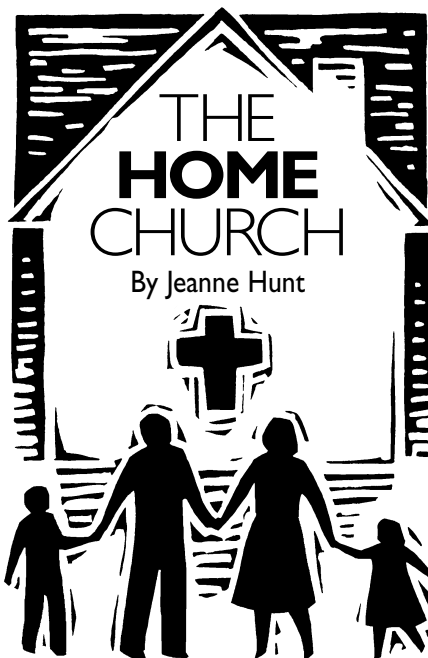
Jesus teaches that salvation depends not on saying the right words or formulas, but on living one's life the right way.

REFLECTION
QUESTIONS
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REFLECTION

- What can you do to keep your faith strong?
- What kind of storms seem to cause spiritual calamities?
- What does Jesus promise to those who are willing to follow the gospel?
- Describe a life built on rock and a life built on sand.
- Name some people you consider to have rock solid faith.

PRAYER

Shore up my faith, Lord.
Give me the resolve
to live your word.
Give me insight
to avoid those things
that weaken the rock.
Make me a stronghold
of your love.
Amen



A rock solid foundation is more important than designer furniture or gorgeous views when designing or remodeling a home. The basics must be in place before the decorating begins.

Family life, too, is full of opportunities for building solid foundations. The Catholic faith can be the basis of a strong life of love and mutual support.

However, many of us try to build love and healthy family life on shaky ground. What I mean is that we put the focus of sports, money, and social life etc. We find ourselves not teaching prayer to our little ones, losing touch with parish activities in lieu of that sport's schedule, forgetting to spend time talking to each other about what's going on in our hearts and souls.

Soon enough our family's spiritual roots let go and we find that we have slipped away from each other and our faith. It seems to happen so gradually that we hardly notice that the faith that we profess is taking a back seat to life's pressures.

On this Sunday, it might be a good time to resolve to return to the basics of faith once again. Jesus is the rock of our salvation. Put the Rock first in your family.



Ask most Catholics what they are doing for Lent and they'll tell you what they're "giving up." Fasting and abstinence are key Lenten disciplines.

Fasting involves severely limiting our intake of all food for a set period of time. It is required of all adult Catholics on Good Friday and Ash Wednesday. Abstinence involves giving up all meat on the Fridays of Lent.

Both practices, done with the right attitude, encourage us to pay attention to our relationship with God more than to our ordinary human needs. Done in the proper spirit, the focus is not on what we're giving up but on what we get from God at all times.

The other two Lenten disciplines, prayer and almsgiving, usually get less attention, at least in the popular understanding of Lent. But they're essential to a full understanding of the season and the spiritual growth it's meant to inspire.

Many families combine fasting and abstinence with almsgiving by setting aside money that they would have normally spent on food and eating out during Lent. That money is then given to an organization that feeds the hungry. Others set aside time to volunteer at a soup kitchen or food pantry.

WEEKDAY
READINGS

Monday	Tb 1:3; 2:1a-8; Mk 12:1-12	Thursday	Dt 30:15-20; Lk 9:22-25
Tuesday	Tb 2:9-14; Mk 12:13-17	Friday	Is 58:1-9a; Mt 9:14-15
Wednesday	Jl 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18 Ash Wednesday	Saturday	Is 58:9b-14; Lk 5:27-32