

THE MATTHEW "SANDWICH"

Sermon, January 22, 2017

Texts: Matthew 4:12-23, (5:1-12), 7:24-29, and 9:35

I've mentioned this before, but I really relate to the father who said, *"The only time in my life that I have ever regretted being a dad is when I have encountered those three words that strike terror in my heart: 'SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.'"* I know I'm good at a number of things, but I am one of those technically-challenged fathers. When Hannah was four or five years old, if something broke around the house, she would almost reflexively say in her sweet little voice, "Let's call Mr. Soave!" (For those who don't know, church member Rob Soave was our Building and Grounds chairman for years, a very handy and capable man whose wife Nancy helped care for my children when they were small). On more than one Christmas Eve in the years when my children were much younger, I would go home from worship to do some required assembling on some large toy or big wheel trike or scooter, and found myself muttering words that are not in the Christmas story. I get easily confused and frustrated by technical instructions, and often impatiently plow ahead without consulting them ... which doesn't often end well. I think of this when I'm having a pastoral conversation with someone who struggling over the assembling of their life ... many of us have trouble following directions, there are things we all do wrong in trying to assemble our lives on our own and at times our "wheels" come flying off, or everything starts to come apart, or life just doesn't work like it was supposed to. We don't receive life readily assembled; it has to be put together along the way. However, we do have a Heavenly Father Who, unlike this earthly father, really knows how things fit together. He has all the detailed instructions.

The background for today's Gospel is that Jesus is being followed by huge crowds whose lives are coming apart, according to Matthew 4:23, crowds who bring *"... every disease and every sickness among the people."* These are crowds of people who don't have it all together, crowds of people who are seeking direction, crowds of people who are seeking healing. In Matthew 4:23 we read, *"And Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every sickness among the people."* Then, five chapters later, in Matthew 9:35, we find almost verbatim the same summary: *"And Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness."* "Sandwiched" between these two "end slices," these two summary descriptions of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, are two major "fillings," two major sections. I know it's a bit of a reach, but this was the inspiration of my sermon title. Between these two "end slices" we have a something of a Dagwood sandwich ... you've seen those depicted in the Blondie cartoon strip; when I served the church in New Providence, New Jersey, I frequented the Avenue Deli just down the street from the church and would always order their "Dagwood," a huge and delicious sandwich with five ingredients. Well, here we have Matthew's five chapter "sandwich" about Jesus' ministry in Galilee ... in chapters five, six and seven we have the Sermon on the Mount, dedicated to Jesus' teaching, and then we have chapters eight and nine, we have largely a collection of stories attesting to Jesus' miraculous power.



This five chapter sandwich seems designed by Matthew to present us first with Jesus teachings, and then with Jesus power ... first to demonstrate the way of God's kingdom, and second to demonstrate the power of that kingdom. I think Matthew puts his material together in such a way as if to say, *"You can't have one without the other."* You can't have the teaching Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount without the miracle-working Jesus who cleansed the leper, stilled the storm, took on the demonic, healed the blind, and even raised the dead. We can't separate the two. We can't do what some people try to do: some say they admire the ethical teacher of the Sermon on the Mount, but don't want to get involved with this supernatural, probably-mythical, even ethereal and spooky Person who stills storms and casts out demons and causes miracles to happen. Nor can we do what others try to do. Many have a fascination with the wonder-working miracles of Jesus, and His ability to miraculously heal diseases, but when it comes to actually dealing with the One who said, *"Don't swear, don't call your brother a fool, don't commit adultery, don't even lust, don't return evil for evil, love your enemy, don't sit in judgment on others, don't break your word, your promises,"* — well, that's another story. They like the miracle worker who heals and blesses and takes away their problems, but this intruder into their personal lifestyle? Not interested.

The meat of Matthew's sandwich is basically this: Who Jesus is, is inseparable from His teaching. You can't have one without the other. You want the blessings, you got to follow His instructions! He is God incarnate ... and He knows how life was designed by God to function.

A quick note on how this five chapter block opens. Matthew 5:1 reads, *"Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside, and sat down. His disciples came to him, and He began to teach them, saying"* Who is the audience here? Look carefully ... it is the disciples. Think of two sort of concentric circles: the inner circle of the disciples, and the outer circle of the "crowds." Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up this hillside by the lake. There, with His disciples close by Him sitting in the front "pew," He begins to teach the long and fascinating Sermon on the Mount,

summarizing what God designed life to be about, explaining how things are designed to "work," giving directions about how life was designed to fit together ... directions, by the way, really different from the world's directions.

So it says in verse one that Jesus taught His disciples, but at the end of the sermon in Matthew 7:28 we read, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority and not as their teachers of the Law." So it is clear that the crowds were listening in on all this, even though they weren't the primary target audience. It also seems clear that Jesus wanted the crowd to listen in, even though His sermon is **primarily** addressed to professing disciples. As a bit of an aside, that's the way our Sunday services are conceived. The elements of the worship are prepared to encourage, inspire, teach, and train those who are really making every effort to be disciples, to be followers of Jesus Christ. Not to knock the good and sincere desires of other worshipping communities, but we do not "dumb down" our liturgy for the "seekers." We prepare and plan worship for professing and committed disciples of Jesus. But we also know that in any gathering this size there may be people who aren't really committed disciples ... people who are drawn to this Jesus, but really haven't made up their minds about Him; people who are drawn to the church, but don't really feel like they belong; or people who were once very serious about following Jesus, but "life" happened ... and they've gone away for awhile, but now are back. Primarily the service is designed to teach and inspire and strengthen the life of professing disciples and direct them in worship, but *all* are welcome to come and listen in ... the curious, the onlookers, the skeptical, the searchers, the doubters, the returners who come ... let them come and hear the words of Jesus the same way the crowds gathered in behind the disciples on the mount heard. This was often Jesus' way in the Gospels, He wanted to be heard and He wanted to be overheard! And more often than not, those in the outer circle(s) of the crowd liked what they heard and saw, and worked their way in to the inner circle of those sincerely and seriously committed to following and worshipping Jesus.

Jesus sits down on the spot and delivers this extemporaneous sermon, full of over one hundred points (*not a three point sermon, but a hundred-plus point sermon!*), over one hundred practical things to live by, some of it difficult and hard to swallow, and He quotes no authority but Himself. The Sermon on the Mount is the largest straight block of Jesus' teaching that we have in the Bible. Then He wraps it all up with one final story. This story is simple enough. It has two parts. First, we have the wise builder. He is a sensible, thoughtful, prudent man who builds a house. He takes the time to dig down deep until he finds rock, a solid place to lay the foundation of this house he's going to build, and then he begins to build on this solid ground. It undoubtedly took some extra time and work to find that firm footing ... but it was well worth the extra work. When rain came beating down on the roof, and the winds came blasting at the sides, and when floodwaters rose up ... you get this picture of a storm bringing pressure and potential disaster from ALL sides, all at once ... well, after all that beating, the house remained standing. It stood.

The second builder was a foolish man; I love the word used in the Greek, "moe-roe." It's the word we get "moron" from. Mr. Moron just started in, with full energy he knocked out the project in a speedy manner. He did it *his way*; he didn't take time to dig around much looking for the bedrock, but I'm sure the house looked great when he was done. But what happened to the foolish man's house? When rain came beating down, and the winds came blasting, and when floodwaters rose up ... the sand footing of the house was just too weak to resist. It fell with a great crash, utter collapse.

It's important to note that both builders described are people who have heard Jesus' words. And notice that the exact same things happen to each of the two houses. Difficult things happen, tragedy happens, emergencies come up in everyone's lives ... the rain hits every roof, the streams wash up against every foundation, the wind slaps against the walls of every house. The question is, when the storm is over and has done its worst, will the house still be standing? Have you taken time to build your life, your home, on the solid and sure and tested foundation of God's Word? Obedience to Jesus' words is not so much a protection from troubles as it is a protection *IN* them. Both hear. Both build. Both have the storms hit. The two scenarios are exactly the same except for one thing: the foundation. One hears Jesus' words and puts them into practice, and everything he has built holds up under the worst of storms. And one hears Jesus' words and does *NOT* put them into practice, and everything he has built and worked for falls apart. That is the difference. When the inevitable storms of life come, and the rain pours down, the wind hits, and the floodwaters wash up against the foundation ... in short, when LIFE HAPPENS ... which house remains standing?

Jesus was brought up in the home of a carpenter; He knows something about proper construction. Jesus was not just brought up by a carpenter; Jesus was the son of the Heavenly father, the One Who knows how things are designed to fit together ... this is the meat of Matthew's sandwich. Jesus knows what it takes to build a good life; His words are solid, they are true, tested, and trustworthy.

And we can ... and if we had any sense, we *would* ... build our lives upon them.