

## WE ARE HERE!

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*Lead Minister*

*September 12, 2021, Rally Sunday*

**Text: Matthew 7:24–27**

Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock. But everybody who hears these words of mine and doesn't put them into practice will be like a fool who built a house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed.

*—Common English Bible*

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Over the last several weeks, as I reflected on how Rally Sunday would look in light of the creative way we have had to do it . . . as I prayed for this day and worried about how to authentically represent our hopes and dreams for this community as we try to gather again in each other's presence and reclaim that personal in-person connection that held us spiritually and bodily over so many years . . . as I went to our sacred writings for study and counsel, I kept hearing a word of hope and blessing that stubbornly echoed in my brain: We are still here. We are here. Full disclosure: I kept thinking about a song from the musical *Follies* by Stephen Sondheim. Carlotta, an aging former showgirl turned movie star, sings a song reflecting on how she survived the Great Depression, addiction and rehabilitation, and being blacklisted. The good and bad she sings about could easily lead her to be cynical, but by the time she comes to the end of the song, it is clear that the storm did not overcome her. She was still standing, singing, "I got through all of last year, and I'm here."

That we are here may seem obvious to some, but the reason we are here now, the reason Plymouth Church's witness remains strong, the reason the future is bright may not be so obvious. I invite you to reflect with me not just on the idea that we are here, but also how is it that we continue to show up and be in community and hold on to our covenant, especially after the storms we have endured, both personally and communally.

In our text today, Jesus closes a block of his extended teachings that we call the Sermon on the Mount with a parable about how people can withstand the inevitable storms of life and faith that will befall us. If you will recall, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out a vision for beloved community and the values and behaviors of those who have known the power of divine grace. In his vision and dream of beloved community, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, those who mourn, the poor in spirit—all of those on the margins—are blessed, favored, and celebrated . . . not oppressed nor dominated nor dismissed. Jesus envisions a world of love, peace, and neighborliness, inviting his hearers to embody beloved community by turning the other cheek; loving their enemies and praying for those who persecute them; striving first for the kingdom of heaven and righteousness with confidence that every need will be supplied; doing unto others as they would have others do unto them. Jesus even shares with his followers a model of prayer—humble, earnest prayer—that we recite unto this day.

At the end of this sermon, Jesus does not give a benediction. He does not bask in the accolades about his authority or eloquence. This vision he lays out is not just pop psychology or helpful sayings. He leaves them with a parable about a wise builder and a foolish builder. The one who both hears and lives out this vision of beloved community by putting these words into practice is like a wise builder who builds their house on rock. When the rain, wind, and floods come against the house, the house stands. The one who does not put these words of beloved community into practice is like a foolish builder who builds their house on sand. When the storms rage against the house, it falls. Notice that the issue here is less what each builder builds than it is on what foundation they erected their edifices. We are exhorted to build on that which is solid, lasting, and generative. We are exhorted to be not just hearers of this word, but also doers of the word—simple lesson; not at all easy to do.

Every person who heard this teaching was faced with a choice. They could live out this faithful call to discipleship anchored in a vision of beloved community or choose other fleeting, less secure values or teachings on which to base their lives. But they need only look around to see that the values of empire, of patronage, of religious polarization had led to poverty, oppression, and domination of the most vulnerable. If there was any doubt about Jesus' sincerity or veracity of his vision of beloved community, they soon discovered what he meant. When he finished his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus embarks on a ministry of deep presence with the most marginal people around him, healing and serving people of all walks of life. In his trek to Jerusalem, Jesus embodies beloved community in practice.

Every community of faith, every church, every people of covenant that hopes to serve, thrive, and contribute to building up the kingdom has to reckon with what is foundational, what is consequential, what holds up. We have to tend to the ground on which we have built our witness. In his reflection on this parable of the wise and foolish builder, the theologian Thomas Long pointed out that the hearers of this teaching build many houses. Readers of this Sermon on the Mount, popular and familiar as it is, appeal to a range of values and views in creating churches, organizations, and communities of faith. But how many of these edifices can stand when the inevitable storm rages and batters them? Those who build their lives, their communities, their churches on the sure foundation of love, peace, and neighborliness will not fall.

For 164 years, Plymouth has stood. Over the last year and a half, Plymouth Church, along with churches and communities all over the world, was battered and menaced by the storm of an indiscriminate and unmerciful global pandemic. The wind of uncertainty and anxiety blew mercilessly all over us. The flood of distance and separation overwhelmed us. Torrential rain of grief, loss, and deep longing for contact and connection poured over us. But we did not forget discipleship. We did not give up on our covenant. We did not neglect the purposes of the church. We were not separated from the Divine presence, which never ceased to kindle our hearts, our service, and our compassion. And we are here.

How did we do it? Oh, someone may point to our history, our tradition, and our abundance as the answer. Some people will appeal to some vague theological idea of blessing. But there is something about our encounter with God's grace and mercy that called us to a deeper ethic of living. There is something about this vision of beloved community that has captured our imagination. There is something about building on a foundation of love, service, and neighborliness that keeps us going. And so, we embodied beloved community in practice.

That we have bound ourselves in covenant as the people of Plymouth Church demonstrates that we have already responded to this teaching of Jesus. That we have committed to seeking and serving God within, among, and beyond ourselves means that we have already committed to being not just hearers of the word but also doers of it. We are caught in the middle of a storm battering the world, and yet, we hold steady because we know who and whose we are. The rock on which we stand has been forged in the generative love, grace, and mercy of God. This house stands. This house stands on firm ground. The song on which our Community Art Project takes its inspiration declares that, like a tree, we are "steady and true, rooted in love." This house stands because we have seen what happens when we do not pull together or when we

take our covenant for granted. We are here because we have put into practice what it means to love, to bind ourselves together, and to serve our neighbors.

Well Plymouth, we got through all of last year, and we're here. Amen.