

St. James Lutheran Church

Pentecost III

June 1, 2008

First Reading: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28

Second Reading: Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-31

Gospel: Matthew 7:21-29

The Urgency of the Gospel

By Richard Holmer

One of the early game shows on television was a show called "Let's Make A Deal," hosted by the irrepressible Monty Hall. The climax of each episode came at the conclusion, when some lucky contestant had to make a momentous decision: Choose Door #1, Door #2, or Monty's Cookie Jar. Behind one of the doors was a collection of fabulous prizes. Behind the other was some kind of a booby prize. And in Monty's Cookie Jar was an unknown amount of cash. The studio audience would shout out their frenzied advice to the contestant as he or she weighed the options. It was always a compelling moment because the person stood on the brink of making a good choice or a bad choice – and they had to live with the consequences of their decision.

The excitement was generated by the fact that there was potential for getting it wrong as well as getting it right. If all the options were fabulous, there would be no tension. The drama was fueled as much by the regret of those who chose poorly as by the elation of those who hit the jackpot.

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Let's Make A Deal was just a TV show – but real life is full of momentous choices.

It has now been determined that it wasn't the iceberg that sank the Titanic, as much as it was sub-standard rivets. The collision with the iceberg didn't just open a gash in the hull of the Titanic. Instead, it also caused a lot

of the rivets holding the hull together to give way. In the rush to complete the construction of the Titanic, the shipbuilders were faced with a shortage of quality rivets and they knowingly used a lesser quality rivet, one containing a high concentration of slag. These brittle rivets were sheared off by the impact, allowing water to rush in between the separated hull plates, and doom the ship.

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The recent financial crisis brought on by the implosion of the sub-prime mortgage loan business was the result of a lot of bad choices. Homebuyers bought more house than they could really afford. Lenders offered mortgages to persons who were not well qualified. Investors bought up large quantities of these loans, looking to make easy money without weighing the risk. A lot of people got it wrong – and a lot more people are suffering the consequences of those short-sighted decisions.

Life continually presents us with choices to be made. These choices are what make life interesting – and also, at times, harrowing. Just like those contestants on Let's Make A Deal, we can get it wrong or we can get it right. Despite what some short-sighted people want to tell you, not all life choices are equally valid. No matter how sincere we are in making a decision, we can be sincerely mistaken. Some paths we choose turn out to be dead ends. Some bright ideas lose their luster. And, as Jesus tells it, sometimes we build our lives on sand instead of a more solid foundation.

In his Sermon on the Mount, which extends for three full chapters in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus lays out an extensive description of a good and faithful life.

- * Beginning with the familiar Beatitudes:
 - Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
 - Blessed are the merciful.
 - Blessed are the peacemakers.
- * And continuing with challenging directives, like:
 - Love your enemies.

- Don't store up riches here on earth.
 - Seek first the Kingdom of God.
 - Do not judge so that you may not be judged.
 - Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- * Jesus then concludes with the words we hear today:
- "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall."

The sermon presents us with this momentous choice: There is a rock to build your life on – and there's also a whole lot of sand out there. Building on solid rock entails hearing and acting on what Jesus tells us – namely doing God's will. (That's something Jesus teaches us to pray in the Sermon on the Mount: "Thy will be done.")

This is where many of us can get stuck. We dawdle and obfuscate and plead uncertainty about exactly what God's will is for us. But for the most part, God's will is quite clear. Jesus gets pretty specific in his Sermon on the Mount. And for a concise summary, it's hard to beat the prophet Micah:

"He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Micah 6:8

The problem is not that we don't know God's will, but that we are focused on our own will, on what we want. Most often, the hard thing is not knowing God's will, but doing it. We should all learn how to walk humbly, because so often we fail to be just and kind.

You can't pay attention to the Sermon on the Mount and come away thinking of Jesus as a soft touch. Jesus is calm, but he's also passionate. He speaks of peace and love, and he urges us not to be anxious – yet he also challenges our complacency. When you take the time to listen to Jesus, you can hear a note of urgency in his gospel message. It's an urgency that is sometimes lacking in our lives as Christians. Jesus brings good news – good news that demands a response from us, a decision.

- * We hear the stories of Jesus calling the disciples. We know the ones who answered "Yes," who left their fishing boats and followed him. We also know about the rich young man who declined Jesus' invitation to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and come and follow.
- * We know the parable of the Good Samaritan. How two upstanding, religious men declined the opportunity to help a man who had been beaten and robbed. And how it was a despised Samaritan who chose to show love for his neighbor.
- * We've heard the parable of the father with two sons. He told the older son to go and work in the vineyard, but the son said, "I don't want to." Later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the other son and said the same thing. The son said, "Yes, sir!" – but he did not go. Jesus asks: which one did his father's will?

It's the necessity of deciding that lends an urgency to the gospel message. We have real choices to make. God calls us to follow Christ, make disciples and live the Gospel. How shall we respond? Jesus offers more than some interesting ideas for our consideration. He presents the truth about how things are: what gives life, what leads to disaster.

To trust Jesus and to do as he says is to build a life on solid rock.

To do otherwise is to build on sand.

Sooner or later in every life, storms will come. It's then that we discover the truth about what sort of life we've been living – and what we've actually built our lives on.

Amen.