

“Shifting Sand”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Matthew 7:21-19

August 20, 2017 - Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Pick a Caesar, any Caesar! Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Claudius. You get to choose. But be careful, you're going to spend some quality time with the one you pick, so you might consider what each liked to do for fun.

We will transport the Caesar of your choice to 2017 via Time Sled, phone booth, hot tub, DeLorean, TARDIS, or Time Displacement Equipment. (I guess you need to choose your favorite fictional time machine as well.)

And then we will give that Caesar a tour of Alabama. And the first thing he will notice is that, along with incredible barbecue, Alabamians sure do like to celebrate the Roman Empire. Your Caesar will be thrilled to discover that in every neighborhood there are buildings dedicated to the triumphs of Rome. And in so many homes, Alabamians pay homage to the Roman way of doing things. And the more bloodthirsty of these guys will be impressed that we have chosen as our symbol of celebration of the eternal victory of the empire Rome's favorite torture device for execution: the cross.

Then we will have to explain to ol' Caesar that they, in fact, did not win out — that their empire crumbled. We'll tell him about the man from the far reaches of the empire, from the backwater town of Nazareth, who was a threat to the local religious authorities and their peace with the empire. We'll tell how a thug governor did the dirty work and crucified this man.

Caesar will interject with glee that if Rome wanted simply to execute someone, there were other ways to do it; crucifixion was reserved for special cases. Of course, there were a lot of special cases. Crucifixion was used as the ultimate punishment for criminals who threatened the social order or were enemies of the state. It was painful and violent and humiliating. And it served as a spectacle to warn any others with an inkling of crossing Rome. So, don't you see, Caesar will contend, that these crosses everywhere serve to remind everyone of the great power of the empire.

Ah, but there is more we need to tell Caesar. For this man's story did not end on their cross. This is not a story of execution, but of resurrection. The crosses Caesar sees are not markers of history or Roman pride or heritage. They are symbols of truth. Roman emperors are confined to history books and plays and the occasional film. But the cross stands today to remind us of a truer God than Rome ever knew. The cross stands today to remind us that the worst violence that humanity can throw at us falls silent at the feet of the anointed one, the Christ, who lives in each of us as we seek to follow him.

You see, Caesar, the house of Rome was built on violence and oppression. And so it was a house built 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!”

Poor Caesar wasn't here the last time we celebrated the sacrament of baptism in this sanctuary, in October, with little John Hillis. When we Presbyterians baptize, before we get to the affirmations and the water and the joy, we join in the ancient rite of renunciations. I asked John's parents that day:

“Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” And when they answered in the affirmative I asked further: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?” and “Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?”

When we are welcomed into the faith we — or someone on our behalf — answers these questions. We ask that those being baptized are clear as they enter the waters that they are turning away from sand and building their house upon rock. We do not promise them that there will not be rains and floods and wind in their life following Christ. But we promise to stay with them though the storm, and that the house they build in our midst will stand.

This rock and sand business isn't a floating saying of Jesus, an aphorism he tossed about while strolling down the road. It is crucial to remember that this is the end of the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon delivered to his inner circle of disciples, and then to his real inner circle, the messy, confused, broken and brokenhearted crowd that gathered on the hill below him. He started with all the *backwards-blesseds*: the meek, the grieving, the poor in spirit, the persecuted. He talked about them all being salt and light, eternal and elemental to the reign of God. He commanded that they trust in God and God's abundance and spend energy making God's reign a reality instead of worrying. He told them not to judge, but to leave that to God, searching their own eyes for logs. And after all of that he says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock...”

Blessing those who suffer — that is rock. The oppression of the empire is sand.
Salt and light, flavor and sustenance, letting God's light shine like a city on a hill — that is rock.
Hiding the light under a bushel basket is sand.
Trusting in God's abundance is rock. Hoarding treasures on earth is sand.
Honesty about one's own need for forgiveness is rock. Judging the worthiness of others is sand.

A few years ago, the Men's Bible Study group here at Edgewood read a book about a house divided that could not stand. It was called *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*. We're not gonna fib in church — we read this book as an excuse to do a road trip up to see the battlefield of the Battle of Chickamauga. But we learned a few things along the way in spite of ourselves. Author Harry S. Stout asserted, while leaning on the work of many others, that in the Civil War there was “something mystical taking place, what we today might call the

birthing of a fully functioning, truly national American civil religion.”¹

This civil religion — the deep reverence for our stories, the near deification of our heroes, the sacred vows we make as Americans — has led to baseball and apple pie and ingenuity and boundless spirit and the moonshot and the Red Cross and iPhones and rock and roll and Flannery O’Connor and the American Dream and Rosie the Riveter and the defeat of the Third Reich when we were not ambiguous about Nazis.

And it has given us a reluctance to be honest about our past, as if we are too fragile to talk about genocides and slavery and Jim Crow and baked-in inequality. I am so deeply grateful to have been born in this country. And I cannot express how fortunate I am that people like my grandfather and uncle have been willing to put their lives on the line. Yet I find it troubling that it’s more upsetting to the American mind to see a football player kneel during our national anthem than it is to see young black men shot. One of those is more offensive to the American civil religion.

Of course, the Christian Church has had a similar problem throughout its history. Here at Edgewood, we seek to be honest: Church history (up to the present) is filled with violence and fear and oppression and sin. We love the Church. We love our country. We must, however, be clear about what is rock, and what is sand.

After the Civil War, Confederate states had to pass new constitutions to replace the ones they had created after they rebelled against the Stars and Stripes of United States of America. Here in Alabama, in 1901, delegates to the state’s Constitutional Convention heard the president of the convention, John B. Knox of Calhoun County, ask them in his opening address: “[W]hat is it that we want to do?” He answered his own question: “Why it is within the limits imposed by the Federal Constitution, to establish white supremacy in this State. This is our problem, and we should be permitted to deal with it unobstructed by outside influence.”

This past Thursday, the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley met. Pastors and elders from PC(USA) churches in central Alabama gathered to worship and to do business. And late in the morning, they voted to create an Anti-Racism Team, charged with providing education and action for the presbytery to actively resist the scourge of racism. Thanks be to God.

Earlier in our passage from Matthew, Jesus says, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’” Scholars think that the “many” that Jesus is talking about here are people who were using his name even though they weren’t connected to him and did not have his seal of approval. Perhaps they were charging people for healings in Jesus’s name. Or they were using Jesus’s reputation to advance an agenda that was not good news for the lost and forsaken. They were

¹*Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War.* Harry S. Stout. p. xvii

building sandcastles and advertising them as rock solid.

When we fail to know and to learn from our history, we are in a house built on sand.

When we look around and declare “everyone needs to change, except for me,”
we are in a house built on sand.

When we fail to confront those who use Jesus’s name, or his words, or cross to oppress,
we are in a house built on sand.

When we tell people to stop living in the past, to get over what happened to their ancestors, yet
demand that our history of white supremacy be honored, we are in a house built on sand.

When we see children of God crying out from below and we look for excuses to ignore their
cries,

we are in a house built on sand.

It does not need to be so. The rock is plain to see, with room for many houses to be built. To
build there requires putting down all that we carry in order to pick up a cross of righteousness
and truth and vulnerability and willingness to know the suffering of all. It is the cross of truth. It
has nothing to do with supremacy and false equivalence and polls.

The cross stands empty on the rock to show us the way to resurrection and everlasting life
through Christ. Jesus, the one who sought out those that the system spit out and met them at
tables and told them that they were blessed. Jesus, who died for resisting broken structures.
Jesus, who remains with us, after all the sand has washed away.