

Date: February 23, 2014
Scriptures: Leviticus 19:1-2; 9-18; I Corinthians 5:38-48
Title: Life in the Neighborhood

Twelve years ago this June,
George and I moved into our house.
We built it from the ground up ~
not us personally,
but you know what I mean.
It was a long process
about four months in the design phase
and twelve long months in the building.
It is one of the most challenging things
a couple can do together,
and I will never **ever** do it again.

Knowing that the clay Austin is notorious
and believing an ounce of prevention
is worth a pound of cure,
we decided early on
to pay several thousand **dollars** extra
to have additional rebar
added to the foundation.

The builder thought it was
a foolish expenditure of money.

I am so glad we acted "foolishly."
Even with those precautions,
we have had some small movement
in the foundation.

Enough to require replacement
of a couple of tiles in two bathrooms.

You haven't lived until you've lived through
the hammering, chiseling, and sawing
required to remove tile from a slab foundation.

I listened to that music
all day long this past Wednesday.

Good foundations are important.
not only in the building of a house,
but in almost every aspect

of human endeavor.
They are important in
getting an education
and marriages
and rearing children
and yes in living and working together
in a faith community.

Everything in life starts with a foundation.
Some are good; some aren't.
Paul tells the church in Corinth
that the church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ her Lord.

The Corinthian church
is among the first Paul plants.
That church comes about twenty years
after his conversion experience
out on the Damascus Road.

Think about it.
He trains twenty years before he plants
that early church.
That's longer than most doctors train today.
Paul spends about a year and a half in Corinth
getting the church up and running.

After he leaves,
several itinerant preachers come through
all preaching something different from Paul.

The church begins
breaking into factions, as churches will do,
with some supporting this preacher,
others supporting that preacher;
still others Paul.

Upon learning of the disputes,
Paul writes to the congregation
urging them not to be beguiled
by their "wisdom",
for the wisdom of this age
is foolishness before God.

Then, in the very next breath,
he exhorts them to remember

the only foundation
on which they can build
is Christ's foundation.

No church,
not this church or any other church,
belongs to any of its pastors,
past or present.

No church,
not this church or any other church,
belongs to a particular person or group.

No church,
not this church or any other church,
belongs to a particular interpretation
of scripture.

Rather,
this church and all churches belong to Christ.
Only Christ can lead
the church and her people
into holy living,
for Christ alone
is the wisdom of God
and the foundation of the church.

Too often,
we make foolish choices.

Too often,
we disregard, even cast aside, God's wisdom
for the world's wisdom.

An article in last Monday's *American Statesman*
about Austin's attempts
to provide housing for the homeless
tells the story of such a man.

(Andrea Ball, "Austin Home to Fewer Homeless," *Austin American Statesman*, Monday, February 17, 2014).

Hugh Miles,
spent more than seven years on the streets,
drinking, drugging, and panhandling.

He slept under overpasses

and on freezing nights
 wrapped in plastic to keep warm.
His life changed in June 2102
 after his brother saw him begging
 on a street corner.

It was then
 that Mr. Miles saw himself
 as his brother saw him.
Mr. Miles says,
 “I was so embarrassed. I never felt so low.”
It was then he decided to turn his life around.
He went into rehab.
Later Caritas helped him get an apartment
 at Foundation Communities Apartment Complex.
Today he lives in a 238square foot apartment,
 volunteers at his church and the ARC,
 and loves to paint.
Having traded in
 the world’s wisdom for God’s wisdom,
 Mr. Miles acknowledges this is one
 of the happiest times in his life.

Mr. Miles’ transformation
 is nothing short of miraculous.
It seems
 the whole world should be clamoring
 for the wisdom of God,
 and if not the whole world,
 then at least the church.

But, that is not the case.
Far too frequently,
 both the world and the church
 give God’s wisdom short shrift.
Since it is so important,
 we need to know what it is.
God’s wisdom is in part an orientation towards life ~
 God’s decision to cherish creation
 and everything in it.
This decision leads God to be a God of blessing

a God who builds up, not tears down;
a God who helps, not hurts;
a God who holds on, not lets go.

Unlike the gods of other nations,
the God of the Hebrews
does something truly astounding.

This God shares wisdom with his people
rather than holding onto it.

To the Hebrews,
God gives the Ten Commandments.

We heard several of them
in this morning's First Reading.

- leave something in the fields and on the table
for the less fortunate;
- live with integrity and tell the truth;
- refrain from stealing or making a profit
at the expense of others;
- help and do not hurt those with disabilities
or experiencing difficulties;
- refuse to gossip or slander another or hold a grudge;
- treat every person equally and with respect.

The commandments are simple rules for living,
humane ways to live.

If people followed them,
the world and each of us would be better.

Yet, doing that is difficult for us.

We ignore the less fortunate
and turn away from them.

We bend the truth to our ends.

We seek to benefit ourselves
at someone else's expense.

We alleviate our anxiety
or discharge our anger
by gossiping about others.

We are unwilling to forgive
those who have wronged us.

We are inhospitable
to people different from us.

God's decision to be a blessing,
to be gracious unto us,
costs God something.
Our difficulty in following the ten rules
is a window onto that cost.
In Jesus' life and death,
that cost is fully revealed.
We see what it costs God
to remain in relationship with us.
That, however is not all we see.
We also see God's wisdom lived out in the world,
for Jesus is the incarnation of God's wisdom.
In word and deed, he shows us how to live.
He lives full of grace,
honoring God and blessing others.
He is the bright shining star
in the web of life ~
the one to whom we can look
to know how to live.

Likewise, our decision
to be in relationship
with the God of Christ and God's people
costs us something.
The cost is the willingness
to allow God to renew and recreate
our hearts, minds and actions.
That is not a natural thing to do.
It means putting ourselves in God's hands
and allowing God to transform us
as a potter transforms a lump of clay
into something beautiful.
It means allowing God
to expand our minds to see
beyond categories and boundaries;
and to enlarge our hearts
to hold the things God loves;
and to direct our actions to bless
and not to harm.

Through Christ,
God gives us a way to live.
God's way makes life
in the neighborhood
not only good
but beautiful.
Beautiful for all God's creation
and all God's people.
The foundation of this life,
this beautiful life,
is Christ Jesus,
God's living and life-giving wisdom.
Amen.