

Sermon: The Flailing, Flawed, Flimsy Foundation for the Kingdom of God

Year C, Proper 16

[Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29;](#)

[Luke 13:10-17](#)

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I'm standing in the middle of a small patch of pine trees. In long pants, sweating my brains out in a light rain, with my reading glasses hooked into the collar of my tee shirt. I have my cell phone and a sheaf of papers showing the location of all the customers of the little non-profit that provides water to the summer cottages along a 3 mile stretch of the Maine coast. My dad is stepping down as the treasurer and chief civilian plumber. That meant he sent the bills and would get the initial calls of a leak or something. If he couldn't fix it, he'd call the real plumbers. Dad's stepping down and he may be the only one who know both who all the customers are and where the water shutoffs to their cabins are. So we're working on a map of sorts, with documentation, so that we have some record of what's going on.

Dad's a CPA, not a plumber. I'm a minister, not a plumber. Dad's got a bad hip and I've got a dodgy knee and we're clambering all over God's green acre, woods, along the rocky shore line, peering under houses, following one-inch black water lines that lie in ditches and back in the overgrowth. In my internet start up days, we would have called this arrangement "sub-optimal."

But if you are an association of homeowners who put together a non-profit to own two pumphouses and a few miles of pipes that run along the surface of the ground, getting a CPA and a minister to document your water system is not the worst thing in the world. In fact, we don't know enough to make any assumptions. We can't look at the former fishing shack, perched on pilings out over the water which is now an absolutely darling one-bedroom cabin and say, "of course the water shut off will be right there." We have to bushwhack through the Japanese knotweed until we catch a glimpse of the blue or red or brass handle. We may not be able to find the shutoff every time, but when we can find it, there's no doubt it's found.

Dad and I are a flailing, flawed, flimsy foundation for a water company. But you could do worse. And we are tenacious. And we will keep going even when the light sprinkle turns into torrential downpour.

How much of our lives are like that? We have no idea what we're doing as parents and after only a few hours, they send us home from the hospital with an incredibly tiny human. We've never been married before, or we have and it didn't work out so well, and here we are 5 months, 5 years, 50 years later still trying to figure out how to live with this ever-changing individual that agreed to give this marriage thing a go. We believe in honoring our parents and yet, in their seniority, they are beginning to make some very sub-optimal decisions. We have no clue about how to intervene, but clearly we need to or the lack of decent sleep is going to kill them. And don't get me started on our professional lives, where at least once a day the boss presents us with a challenge we have no idea how to tackle.

We look at all the sub-optimal elements that are the foundation of our lives and we're ok with them. They may not be great, but they're working. And if we need help, we're getting better at asking for it. Plus the church where we go has a pretty eclectic group of humans in it. Surely someone know something about how to get a flying squirrel out of a garage loft.

So we're ok with a flailing, flawed, flimsy foundation for much of our life. But when it comes to the Kingdom of God, we take a huge step back. We're called by God and our immediate response is, "I'm totally unqualified." Silently, to ourselves we add "and this is highly inconvenient." Why is that?

In part, of course, we want to bring our best to God. Maybe that started out as a sort of dress-up thing, like when we were little kids. We could pretend to be bus drivers in our cardboard banana box from the grocery. We're going to pretend to be something we're not. That may have morphed into the fake-it-'til-you-make-it philosophy, where you'll act your way into being the person you think God wants. But as our faith matures, we find ourselves just wanting to bring our best to God because God has given us the best things in our lives and in this world.

In part, we're a bit afraid of God. We hear the reading from the book of Hebrews about how freaked out the Israelites were of Mount Sinai and we understand. Even Moses was a bit scared of God's presence on Mount Sinai, and given that he experienced *a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them* (Hebrews 12:18-19), you can see why. I know the author of Hebrews meant to be reassuring, that things were not as scary on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem but *innumerable angels in festal gathering, the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect?* (Hebrew 12:22-23) I'm not entirely convinced that's less scary than what you find on Mount Sinai.

But I think most of the reason we step back from God's call to us for the Kingdom of God is that we think God's got it wrong. Either God is wrong about calling us because we clearly don't have the skills that it takes to accomplish whatever assignment is in front of us. Or because the assignment isn't going to do anything to bring the Kingdom of God into being. I burn water for tea, why should I get involved with the Take Home Meals. In the long run, it's not going to matter that the Brookline Public Library had a Drag Queen Story Time, one way or another, so why get involved?

Does God have it wrong? Well, there are plenty of cooks for the Take Home Meals. What we need is someone with organizational skills to get all the cooks and ingredients and customers coordinated. It might even be possible that the cooks would welcome a non-cook who would let them get on with it. The Take Home Meals provide about 5% of this church's budget. If the work we do here is Kingdom-worthy, then surely a key financial support for it is too? In the long run, it may not matter what Story Time events the library holds. But in the long run, isn't one thing we are all longing for is for people to disagree with each other and still treat each other as neighbors? Wouldn't showing how to do that be Kingdom-worthy?

So does God have it wrong? Or do we? God says to Jeremiah when he is only a little boy, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* (Jeremiah 1:5) What makes you so sure God didn't know you before you were born? What makes you so sure God doesn't look at you and see all your flailing, flawed, flimsy fooling around and say to God's self, "That, that right there, that is exactly what I'm looking for. That's the foundation of the Kingdom of God."?

Look through the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation, the ratio of the people we would pick first at recess compared to those we would pick last, including ourselves, is pretty low. Given a choice, God rarely picks the varsity. God definitely has a preference for the kid crawling out of a locker with his hair all messed up.

Using my psychic powers, I can sense that some of you are thinking something you would never say out loud. “Cath, you’re only saying this so I feel so guilty when you ask me to do something for the church that I say ‘yes.’” So let me be really clear. Guilt is a lousy way to get anything done. The one thing I know for sure is that when I ask someone to take on some task for the church, the worst possible answer you can give me is “yes” when the answer should be “no.” I would much rather hear an honest “no” than have you say “yes” when you can’t follow through. I promise.

So I will still ask you guys to do stuff.

The Book of Hebrews says *see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking* (Hebrews 12:25). I’m going to ask you to do stuff, I’m going to invite you to try things, I’m going to encourage you to see what will happen when you follow God’s call, not because you will succeed or fail in my eyes or in the eyes of the community. I hope you succeed and I’ll do everything I can to help you succeed. But when God calls, deciding in advance why God is calling is putting yourself above God. That’s what’s so suboptimal for your soul, for your experience of God’s love in this world. I’m going to keep asking and encouraging because most of the time answering God’s call takes you someplace you never imagined.

It may be Mount Sinai, a treacherous and dangerous mountain, a place where God’s people received God’s word even if it was through fear. Still it was a holy place. Yes it was a difficult place. But it was a holy place.

It may be Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You may be welcomed to a feast with awesome music and a great company. A holy place indeed.

It may be the woods of Maine. Because at no point did I want to be following a one inch black pipe through the leaf litter and the rain, looking for a blue handle while I tried to keep my papers dry. But I caught a glimpse of how much my Dad must love his community up in this corner of Maine to do this, spring and fall, year after year, so the summer people could come up and enjoy this beautiful place. I caught a glimpse of how much my Dad must love me to do this ridiculous thing because I had said I would document the system.

Wherever God’s call takes you, Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, the inter-tidal zone near a former fishing shack, isn’t it worth going there to catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God? *See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking* (Hebrews 12:25) Hebrews says. Not because God will be disappointed in your flailing, flawed, flimsy foolishness. But because you’ll miss catching a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. More than that, you’ll miss catching a glimpse of yourself as part of the foundation of the Kingdom of God, flailing, flawed and flimsy though you are. God said, *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.* (Jeremiah 1:10) It might be worth answering God’s call, just to find out what that feels like.