**Culmore United Methodist Church**

**September 17, 2019**

**Pastors:** *Rev.* *Nelson Neil, Rev. Beth Neil*

**Music:***Dr. Wonhee Kang, All Nations Choir*

**Personal Reflection:** If we do not have Jesus as our cornerstone, holding us together, strengthening us and keeping us in alignment with his purpose, then nothing we build will be of value.—*T.L. Lowery*

**Prelude** *How Great Is Our God*   **WS 3003**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Happy birthday!** Are there any birthdays this week?

If so, let us know so we can wish you many happy returns.

**Bible Study** is **Wednesday, September 18** at 10:00, as we continue our study of the book of James. *Come for coffee and discussion*.

**(If she’s here: Congratulations, Julia!**

It’s a great accomplishment to graduate from university.

It’s an even greater accomplishment to graduate with a double degree.

Now imagine graduated *summa cum laude*

*–* with highest honors in both your B.A. and B.S.

That’s what Julia has done. Well done!

Today, we’re continuing with series based on

the questions you posed

—questions about your faith.

Last week we talked about that BIG question:

*Why Can’t I Believe*

with attention to the stumbling blocks

that cause us to doubt.

Do you remember the **card exercise** we did during the service?

We looked at the current status of our individual faith.

It’s like taking your faith pulse

Specifically:

1. What do I believe?
2. How much do I believe it?
3. What makes me believe?

What is the proof for me?

Why did we do this reflection?

Because we need to know where we stand,

what our foundation is,

before we’re able to move forward with confidence.

So today is Part II of this very big question about Faith.

It’s about exploring: *What grounds me?*

*Where do I stand regarding faith?*

 *What grounds me in my faith?*

*Am I on firm ground or is it a bit slippery?*

 *If that ground is not very firm,*

*what do I need to do*

*to get a stronger foundation?*

For how can we address the stumbling blocks to our faith

—those stumbling blocks that cause us to doubt,

if we don’t have a starting point of certainty?

**Passing of the Peace**

**House building. –Ask Noel.**

What’s the first thing you do

when you get ready to build a house?

**Prepare the ground, get rid of the rubbish**

…(my neighbors had found a TRACTOR buried under the ground

where they were going to build their house…

…a tractor!

They had to get rid of that buried tractor

before they could build anything.

**Lay the foundation.**

What kind of house do you get

 if you don’t lay a foundation?

One that isn’t going to last long.

Without a foundation, it won’t take much

to knock the house down.

It won’t withstand harsh storms.

Think about this as we hear this parable of Jesus.

**Scripture:** *Matthew 7: 24-27*

**1st Reader** Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

**2nd Reader** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

**1st Reader** But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

**2nd Reader** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

As **William Barclay** notes,

Jesus was a carpenter-

 he knew a thing or two about building a house.

So when Jesus spoke about house foundations,

 he knew what he was talking about.

Jesus’ parable is based

on the kind of thing that could happen in ancient Palestine.

In Palestine the builder must think ahead.

There were gullies that in summer were sandy hollows

 but come winter, were flooded out.

A man might be looking for a house;

 he might find a pleasantly sheltered sandy hollow;

 and think

*Wow! What a nice place to build my home!*

Only to find out later that he had built on a dried up river bed

that filled with water when winter came

…and his home would fall apart.

Then there were other places,

with nice, flat sandy places that looked so tempting to build on

---why bother digging down to the shelf of rock below?

But disaster lays ahead if you don’t dig down to bedrock,

…because only a house whose foundations are firm

can withstand the storm;

and only a life whose foundations are sure

 can stand up to the test.

**Another building metaphor.**

Look at the front of the bulletin.

What is that?

Arch

What’s holding up the stones?

***Keystone.***

If I build a doorway,

with bricks and mortar alone in a straight line,

will it hold up the weight?

withstand the pressure?

No.

At a certain point the weight of the bricks and stone

forming the upper edge will bring down the structure.

It will fall apart, tumble down..

So with the arch

—one more time—

what holds it all together?

The **keystone.**

That one curved stone in the center of it all.

It holds the whole thing together.

**What’s your keystone?**

What’s holding your life all together?

Without a keystone, we’re hooped/

If we try to live without a keystone in place,

watch out.

For the keystone—that crucial center—

… holds up the whole thing.

Without that one spot to focus the pressure,

the bricks start falling everywhere

—as the structure disintegrates.

Uncentered lives, with untethered, ungrounded faith,

can’t withstand pressure when it comes.

Where can we find that one stone,

which will hold up our faith?

The faith that will hold steady

even when the forces of life press down so hard

that our faith threatens to fall apart.

The answer can be found in **I Corinthians 3: 11**

 As Paul wrote:

*For no one can lay any foundation*

*other than the one that has been laid;*

*that foundation is Jesus Christ.*

* **Hymn** *My Hope Is Built* **UMH 368**
1. 1,2,4)

**Opening Prayer:**

Dear God,

Sometimes we’re like the foolish man,

building his house on shifting sand.

We pick a poor foundation,

and then wonder why life sweeps us away.

Help us choose the solid rock.

Help us make Jesus the cornerstone of our lives. *Amen.*

**When questions arise**

When young: we believe without question

what our parents and other adults tell us.

But as we get older and start to think for ourselves,

questions pop up.

We ask the *Why?*

**Nanny**—wear long sleeved shirt to fish.

Never thought to ask the point of this.

She said to do it, and so I did.

When I became a teenager, I started to wonder why

she wanted me to wear that long-sleeved shirt

in the hot Mississippi summertime.

**Duh-** it was to keep the sun off my arms.

But I wanted a suntan

…so I didn’t wear the long-sleeved shirt.

Guess what happened?

I ended up looking like a toasted critter.

 I then realized the truth of what I had been told.

It’s like that with our faith,

especially for those of us who grew up attending church.

We just absorb what’s told to us,

without really thinking about it.

Then the day comes when questions arise…

We start to ask *Why?*

*Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?*

*Why doesn’t God reward us when we’re good?*

*Don’t I deserve something good?*

It’s all part of the faith journey,

as we embrace our faith, making it our own,

laying the firm foundation.

And on it goes

as we wrestle to understand.

 And this journey to understand

will last all our lives.

**Seminary –** students often came in

 with faith that had never been unpacked

—just accepted and believed.

Then the professors started making us think,

 dig into scripture and commentaries,

 and doubts would sometimes arise

 as students sought to make sense

 of all these different perspectives.

It was a trial by fire.

**Beverly story - Nelson.**

Had to rebuild what her understanding of the Bible was all about.

Ended up in limbo for a period of time while she rebuilt

…We all end up in limbo at different times in our lives,

because we see things that cause us to question

 what we’ve always believed.

The important thing is to keep trying to understand

 and not to give up.

**Mustard seed.**

Sometimes all we have to begin with

 is faith the size of a mustard seed.

Don’t knock that tiny bit of faith,

For it’s enough to start growing our belief.

It’s a gift from God when we

have that bit of faith!

There are many who aren’t sure what they believe,

but they KNOW they believe

in something bigger than themselves.

That’s the beginning,

the foundation.

But they may not know what to do with it.

What do you do with a mustard seed if you want it to grow?

* plant it in good soil,
* water it,
* put it in the sunlight

Do all these things, and that mustard seed can grow into a huge tree.

It’s the same with our faith: *it takes tending and attention to make it grow.*

**Nelson: exercising.**

**Responsive Reading:** *Ephesians 2:13-21*

 (selections)

In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near.

 **For he himself is our peace, who has**

 **destroyed the dividing wall of hostility.**

Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people.

**We are members of his household, built**

**on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone that holds all the parts together.**

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

**Can we read the personal reflection together:**

If we do not have Jesus as our cornerstone,

 holding us together, strengthening us

and keeping us in alignment with his purpose,

then nothing we build will be of value.—*T.L. Lowery*

* **Hymn** *In Christ Alone* **W&S 3105**

Know where you stand.

Know what you believe and why.

We can’t know what we believe and why

 without study, without work,

without prayer. without discipline

…without the help of the Holy Spirit.
 without living out our faith.

This is a long, constant journey throughout our lives.

It happens over a lifetime, deepening,

maturing, growing.

The gains may not look that big at first,

but they’re cumulative.

(**Planting a magnolia tree…**

My dad planted a magnolia tree at our house when I was growing up,

 and for the longest time,

it looked like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

Pitiful, spindly-looking stick in the ground.

But over the years, that little sapling kept on growing

…until now, some 40 years later,

it’s a stately thing over 60 feet tall.

My brothers and sisters,

Don’t give up if your little mustard tree

doesn’t seem all that big.

Don’t get discouraged if it looks like

a Charlie Brown type of Christmas tree.

Give it time…give it attention …give it care,

and one day you‘ll turn around and be blown away at how big it is.

Know who your cornerstone is.

Then from that solid foundation
…regardless of how small it is at the beginning,

Let your faith grow.

**Community Prayer**

**Anthem** *Jesus Is A Rock* **W&S 3074**

**Doxology**  **UMH 95**

* **Hymn** *Go to the World* **W&S 3158**

**Benediction**