

Wisdom As Foundation
 Matthew 7:21-29
 Simi Valley UCC
 May 29, 2005 Dr June C. Goudey

I woke up this morning to an 800 lb Gorilla...no her name is not Ann...It's not a he or she.... it's an "it"...I'll tell you about it in a minute. First let me set the context for today's sermon by way of a few Peanuts...not the nuts but the comic strip characters by the late, beloved and very creative, Charles Schultz.

I need two volunteers. One who has some ham in his blood and one who is the set up character with the straight line. Now picture a cartoon stage with four scenes. Scene one is played by Lucy- that's me, and you'll see why in a moment... and Linus. Scene two has the same characters, with Linus looking out in space a little dazed...Scene three is a silent walking scene with Linus leaving the Doctor's office and meeting the little red-haired girl who is approaching.

So here we go. Imagine a lemonade stand with the words Psychiatric help, 5 cents up top, and on the bottom a sign saying the Doctor is IN. Lucy, as she is prone to do, is expounding on life...

*"Living is living! Living is what counts!
 People come to me and ask me how to live...
 I tell them that to live is to live!
 Living is what makes living!"*

A silent Linus leaves and the red-haired girl approaches.

*"Is the Doctor in?" the little red hair girl asks....
 "No," Linus replies, " I think she's way out!"*

This cartoon moment should prepare you for the next few years.... When people come to services and leave saying..."that new minister at the UCC church is way out"...not just in sexual preference but in her ideas about life...Which brings me back to the 800 lb gorilla.

As I was preparing for today's sermon, I consulted the lectionary, which is a series of readings meant to expose churchgoers to a larger amount of scripture than if the minister just picks his or her favorite passages. Which most Protestants did until Vatican two came along and ecumenical trends created an atmosphere where Catholics paid more attention to preaching and Protestants paid more attention to the texts that shaped the preaching process.

There are many fine reasons to use the lectionary process and for the first twenty-five years of my ministry...emphasis on the first...I've relied on the lectionary ...now into the second twenty-five year stage...I've discovered the gorilla, the church's perpetual emphasis on judgment

This morning's text is a good example... there are three sections
 Section one transitions from the good fruits bear good fruits, and bad fruit bear bad fruit teaching.

Section two is the set up section, where Jesus is saying that only some people are going to get to heaven—the rest he labels evil-doers

Section three has the parable about the two house builders- one built on rock, one built on sand with the result that the one who lacked wisdom built on sand...and when disaster struck it fell,

Section four is the conclusion that pronounces the authority of Jesus' teaching as extraordinary.

One could, and many have, wrapped this text in sermons that remind men and women of the last Judgment. You know the drill—last days—darkness covers the land—Jesus appears riding clouds of glory, sword in hand...separating the sheep from the goats, believers from non-believers... Those who do God's will, those who hear Jesus' words and do them are the sheep...the goats are those who don't. Sheep are like the wise man that builds on rock, the goats are like the foolish man who builds on sand. The tension throughout this text is subtle but huge. Jesus labels those who want to claim him as Lord without acting on his words—evildoer. Hardly a neutral word, evildoer.... remember Reagan's evil empire and Bush's axis of evil? As the current war with Iraq and the so-called Patriot Act demonstrate, these are not neutral words.

This morning's text is ripe with allusions to the garden of Eden and the disobedience of Adam and Eve...well Eve mostly, but that's another story isn't it, or not. If that section didn't get your attention, Matthew makes the point again. The rains fell, the floods came (recall Noah, anyone? And God said the earth was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.)

Now Back to Matthew...And the winds blew and beat on that house...and it fell... ah but not just any fall this..

Matthew tells us ...great was its fall...another allusion to the garden of Eden and humanity's capacity for failure when it comes to knowing right from wrong—like our first parents, according to the Orthodox take on this text, we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Lastly Matthew has the allusion to Petris...Peter, the rock on whom Jesus built his church, subtle perhaps but those who read these texts and looked for the allegorical references to every word would have gotten the point, even if today many Protestants don't.

All of this is reinforced in the hearers mind with the reference to the crowds that were astounded at his teaching and the outright connection that Jesus taught as one having authority, not as the scribes...whose main responsibility was to write down and repeat the words of others. So there you have it...those who call upon Jesus as savior but ignore his teachings are the evildoers, and the foolish ones—those who hear his words and do them- are the wise and the good.

The not so subtle question left to the listener to decipher is this...which are you sheep or goat, believer or unbeliever...? Whose side are you on...? Do you follow Jesus or mouth platitudes...do you act wisely or demonstrate your foolishness...is your life-foundation firm ...secured by God's word? Or are you among those who act without any thought for the consequences of your actions?

The gorilla, in case you think I've forgotten, is the church's fixation with judgment...matters of right and wrong...good and evil woven into a scenario of vindication, not for God's benefit, but for the benefit of those who are convinced that they are the better Christians.

Those of you here today, perhaps some for the first time, may think you have wandered into a community of believers; but there are a host of TV evangelists who would not hesitate to identify progressive, open and affirming congregations as this one as a den of unbelievers

Well guess what? I am an unbeliever. If believing in Jesus means I have to believe in excluding rather than including those who are different than me, in looks... in thought... in sexual preference...or in how I call upon God.

If exclusion and final judgment are the marks of a loving God than I'm an unbeliever and proud of it. The 800 lb gorilla that sits in many of our churches today is wrapped in righteousness and soaked in hypocrisy. Whatever name you want to call this gorilla I call it Christianity's false God. If you believe anger is better than forgiveness than the gorilla is on your back. If you believe you are unworthy of God's love and grace, then the gorilla has you confused. If you believe that violence is the way of love, the gorilla has the upper hand in your life and is leading you astray.

(This portion of the sermon is extemporaneous. I have tried to recapture the essence of what I was trying to say, but those who heard it first hand heard a somewhat different ending.)

Within this morning's text the gorilla sits on top of a simple story about foundations and life choices. Some people build wisely, others do not. Are the latter evildoers or people who have lost touch with their own authority, their own wisdom, to know what is needed to build a safe and secure life? I think they are confused more than anything. The question is what makes us wise? How can we live lives of discerning obedience rather than mere obedience? The latter listens to the authority of others and has no clue as to what may be the truth of their own lives. The former trust a loving God who is within them to lead them in right paths. These are the folk who have come to trust their own body-wisdom, their own truths, and the wisdom that comes with being fully attuned to their own life needs without harming others in the process.

There is a difference between judgment and punishment. God judges us daily not to harm us but to guide us into well-being. To let us know there are consequences to our acts. Whether we pay attention to the wisdom of God within our embodied selves is another matter—its called freedom of choice. Punishment as a form of God's love is never God's first or last act. Punishment is not a mark of God's tough love it's a distortion of God's true compassion. God's first and only act is love!

Our common task is to discover the deep and wise authority of our true selves. Living, as Lucy would say, means living fully in the awareness of "God-within us" versus living fearfully in the authority of God beyond us and over against us. Whenever we confuse the two, that's the 800lb gorilla!