

Distressed Properties

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, June 1, 2008.

Having spent the past several months house hunting and moving from one home to another, I can't help thinking about houses, and about the current housing crisis that is so regularly written about in the newspapers these days. As the housing situation continues to decline, we've begun to learn new vocabulary—subprime mortgages, short sales, foreclosures, distressed properties. One of the more fascinating new concepts that I have learned from the real estate world is the concept of "distressed property." This refers to a home that is being separated from its owner—a home that is losing its owner because the owner can no longer pay the mortgage and the property is being foreclosed. Often the home is abandoned by the time foreclosure takes place. Two things often happen with distressed properties. First, the value of the property goes down; it is deemed to be worth less than the properties around it. Second, the place, especially when it has been abandoned, suffers physical deterioration; it is uncared for. I find it interesting to hear about a "distressed property"—interesting and sad, because it makes so vivid what I suppose to be the feelings of the owners more than the feelings of the house.

But let's go house hunting for a few minutes. Today we are offered three different houses, sitting on three different foundations. From Genesis we have an ark floating on the sea; from Matthew we have two houses, one built on sand and the other on a rock. What can we make out of these houses and the properties on which they sit? If we were truly house hunting, the choice would not be as easy as it looks at first. The first house—an ark—sits on the most unlikely of foundations—water. But the water buoys up the home, and in fact it is quite a livable place for everybody. As for the other two houses, the one with the sturdiest foundation is by far the house to buy—the house built on rock—unless you are in earthquake country where the rocks move out from under you. In that case, a house which is a tent on the sand would be far safer than the earthquake-prone house on the rock. The lesson about house hunting is not as obvious as it seems—and neither is the lesson that Jesus gives to us in Matthew about "hearing his words and acting on it": *"Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock."* From the beginning of Christianity, people have heard the words of Jesus and interpreted and acted on them in conflicting ways. The very existence of the huge number of Christian denominations testifies to the great diversity of interpretations of Jesus's life, ministry and teachings. When Jesus says in Mt. 10 "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," does he support war?

The parable about the two houses comes in Matthew at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount, a discourse which is in part duplicated in Luke but which has a very distinctive orientation in Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus's teaching is always about the reign of God. In much of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts the Kingdom of heaven with the kingdom on earth. Time after time, he challenges worldly or conventional wisdom, challenges the basic social and cultural ways of the world that we often take for granted, by offering an alternative way—the way of the Kingdom.

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies. Love those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those you abuse you.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist and evildoer. Turn the other cheek.” Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Do not worry about tomorrow; strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Jesus is speaking in a world in which people feel a little like distressed properties— a world much like ours now. In an unstable and uncertain world, we sometimes feel as if we are losing our anchor— our owner, so to speak. We sometimes feel unvalued or uncared for. We may be treated by others as unworthy. In tough times, we may even feel abandoned. On the other hand, Jesus is also speaking in a world that tends to exhibit what I call an “ark mentality”— groups or churches that say “we’re on the ark and you’re not; we’re saved and you’re not; we’re the righteous ones and you’re not.” I’m sure each of you has been on the receiving end of the ark mentality at some point.

But in Matthew, Jesus offers to us another reality, a contrary reality to the ark mentality— which I would call the kingdom reality. The ark mentality says, I look to my individual salvation; every man for himself. The kingdom reality says, in the reign of God, we are all one. The ark mentality says, good health and plenty of wealth means that you have God’s favor. The kingdom reality says, it is not about our deserving but about God’s forgiving. The ark mentality says, I rely on my own righteousness and goodness. The kingdom mentality says, we rely on God’s justice and inclusiveness. The ark mentality says, the goal is to get on the ark. The kingdom mentality says, it’s not about being on the ark but about what we do when we get off— about our relationship with God.

The simplistic lesson that we can take from the parable of the two houses is that if we are good boys and girls and follow Jesus, we can withstand any hardship and will be saved. The simplistic lesson that we can take from the story of Noah and the Flood is that if we are righteous, we will be saved. But if you think that the point of the flood is that “being good will save you,” just remember this about the ark: God saved the mosquitoes too!

Jesus tells us to build our lives on rock— the rock of the kingdom of God. The solid rock on which our souls can stand, is not our own goodness and righteousness. This is sand, and it is dangerous sand, because it suggests that only the pure and worthy will be saved and the unworthy will be damned. The rock is God’s love for us. The rock is God’s assurance that our salvation has nothing to do with our own purity or our own worthiness and everything to do with God’s forgiving love. That’s the Good News that we proclaim by word and example, as we promise in our Baptismal Covenant. Our house built on rock, our lives built on God’s love, means knowing that God will never treat us like distressed properties, valued as of little worth and uncared for. We are of infinite value to God, and we can be sure that God will never abandon us.