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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN

Stewardship 2021 Sermon Series 1: "Raise the Roof with Our Compassion and Service" (Raise the Roof with Our Tithes and Offerings has been rescheduled to Sept 26th)

Matthew 7: 24-27

24 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Yesterday was a great day in the life of our church. For those that didn't make it out, it was our Heart of Willmar 150 celebration here in our parking lot and in the street in front of the church. It was a day of fun for the whole family, featuring arts and crafts; all kinds of carnival games; a bouncy house; rides on the FPC wooden ponies, a balloon artist, the William Crooks locomotive replica, food trucks, Latin and Somali dancers, and the highlight of the day - the Jolly Pops children's band. I'm so glad to report to you all that this event was a complete success. Hundreds of people showed up to join in the fun.

And here are some of the things that I saw: The full diversity of our community was on display with children of all of our community's ethnicities represented – Somali, Asian, Latino, and European kiddoes were all represented; Lots and lots of smiles and laughter; Kids grinning as they were perched atop our little wooden ponies; Faces bent in concentration as they molded clay and shaped their art project into a caterpillar or butterfly; kids celebrating as they sunk a shot in the basketball game, cornhole, or golf; kids lining up to get a balloon giraffe or bumble bee; moms and dads mixing and mingling and sharing in the fun with their kiddoes; people making new friends and meeting a neighbor they did not know before; people dancing and jumping along with the Jolly Pop's tunes during a

fabulous concert; a few of you even cutting a rug and surprising us with your dancing prowess as you twirled around with the Latin dancers; and so much more.

But, above all I saw you, dozens of you, festooned in your red t-shirts. You were working so hard. But you were loving it. You were cheerfully helping and encouraging each other. You were cooperating in a spirit of joy and fun. You were sharing laughter and practicing teamwork. As they say, many hands make for lighter work!

I can speak for Leanne on this one too, and I have to say this as your pastors watching you all do all of this fabulous work yesterday: Way to go! We are so very proud of you! We love you and we think you are terrific! You are a blessing to this neighborhood and this community. We call ourselves, "The Church with Heart, in the Heart of Willmar." Friends, yesterday the Heart of Willmar was beating - powerfully, wondrously, and beautifully. Way to go.

And I don't know about you all, but speaking of hearts, my very own heart needed what happened yesterday. Because maybe you're feeling what I've been feeling a little bit too - and that is that perhaps your heart has become a little bit crusty over the last year and half? This whole pandemic affair has been awful. It has been a long slog of endurance and hardship and pain. And the cumulative whole of that has worn on us and beaten us down. I feel like I personally bore up well for the first year of the pandemic, but this past summer I felt myself feeling discouraged and tired. I found myself getting a bit pessimistic and frayed around the edges. My heart was getting crusty, and it needed a bit of therapy.

And even though yesterday was hard work, and I saw every one of you in nonstop motion throughout the whole day, I hope that you can also feel, too what I'm feeling after yesterday. And that even though my feet are sore, and my muscles are tired, in my heart I felt uplifted. I feel renewed, encouraged, energized and hopeful about our calling as a church and our life together.

As Leanne and I reflected on yesterday, we talked about why it was such a good thing for us. One of the things we discussed is that since the pandemic began, and outside of maybe Trunk-or-Treat last fall, this is essentially the first large, all - church, outwardly focused event we've done since the pandemic began. It was an

event that had its primary purpose not to serve our own members, children and youth, families, and regular attenders, rather it had its purpose purely to serve our neighborhood and give back to our community.

In Jesus' parable the storms come to both the foolish builder and the wise. The waves pound relentlessly on the foundation of both homes. We all know this, don't we? We see it all the time. Jesus elsewhere even says that, "for God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5: 45). And the church is no exception to this idea. We here in lake country know the power of Jesus' analogy in high water years. In one powerful thunderstorm with sheer straight-line winds, the waves can eat back 6 to 8 feet of sandy shoreline in a day. When you motor around area lakes, you'll notice the proliferation of large field stone rip-rap shoreline barriers laid down to protect against this very thing.

As people of faith, we need to be constantly checking and reinforcing our foundations to ensure against the harmful effects of these relentless winds and erosive forces that come year after year, taking ever new shapes and forms. And I believe that over the course of the pandemic, we've been weathering a terrible storm featuring huge waves that have been battering us and carving out any sand we may have hidden in our foundation.

Jesus says the only way to go about shoring up your foundation is to, just like the wise builder, not only hear his teachings, but to go and live them out as well. And I believe that that is what we were doing yesterday – hearing and doing.

Because we call ourselves the "Church with Heart, in the Heart of Willmar," and I think that's true of you: You have heard Jesus' Great Commission "**go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,**" (Matthew 28: 19) and hearing that have decided to be a welcoming and inclusive community of faith because you know the radical grace of God means that there is nothing anyone could ever do that could make God love you anymore than God already does, and that the forgiveness we have in Christ is a free gift that is offered to each and every one of us, for each one of us to receive; You have heard Christ's commandment to "³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'^[b] ³¹ [and to]: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12: 30-31) and

that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 40) and have decided to open your building to homeless families, serve meals to college students, teach immigrants how to sew and mend, go on mission trips to hurricane ravaged shorelines, take VBS programs to our sister church on the Spirit Lake Reservation, to stock a blessing box with a continuing supply of food and goods, and so much more.

And every time you do these sorts of things, church family, you are laying down a great stone in the foundation of our life together that can withstand the beating of the waves and the pounding of the surf. And not only that, but I also think that yesterday’s event gives a vision and shape to just the sort of future that that foundation needs to take. Not every future work of our congregation needs to be as huge and as much hard work as our Heart of Willmar 150 celebration, but the same theology and understanding needs to inform it. We are at our best when we don’t look inward to our own wants and needs; we are at our best when we look outward to serve our neighborhood and our community. Especially when we do so to serve families and children, and perhaps especially our own downtown neighborhood

Church revitalization consultants often ask the churches they work with, “what would your community look like if your church wasn’t in it?” This provokes church leaders to ponder questions like we’re mulling over today. And I think we maybe have some clarity into the answer to that question that we maybe didn’t have before yesterday’s celebration

And so, I ask you, what does the future hold for us? Where is God calling us to continue to reach out to our neighborhood’s children and families? Where and how does our inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God intersect with the deep needs of our neighbors? We laid some mighty foundation stones yesterday; I have no doubt they can withstand some huge waves. But it is only because we heard Christ’s voice calling us to love and to serve. May we listen to his voice even more and go where he leads us next.

Alleluia and Amen.