

Sermon: Builder's Guide
Text: Matthew 7:24-27
Date: November 12, 2017
Context: WWPC
Stewardship Celebration Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them
will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.*

Matthew 7:24

You may or may not know the name Antoine de Saint-Exupery, but you likely know at least one thing he has done.

The French author is most famous for writing *The Little Prince*. It's a charming little book that, I suspect, is known to and beloved by most of us here today. It's certainly one of my all-time favorite books.

But he's also the author of one of my all-time favorite quotes.

If you want to build a ship, he writes, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

There may be no one in the world right now who understands and embraces and practices Saint-Exupery's model of collective mobilization than Elon Musk--another name that may only be vaguely familiar.

According to Wikipedia, Mr. Musk is a South African-born Canadian American business magnate, investor, engineer, and inventor. He earned his early fame, and much of his fortune, as the founder of Tesla Motors.

Among Elon Musk's many other core beliefs and values, he is convinced that the era of fossil-based fuels is coming to an end. He also believes that it needs to come to an end, given the damage carbon-based emissions are doing to the environment.

So his first big goal as an engineer and entrepreneur was to produce the best electric vehicles in the world.

To say he succeeded in this endeavor is a bit of an understatement. Tesla's elegant Model S sedan was the best-selling (and most coveted) electric plug-in vehicle in the world in 2015 and in 2016, despite its roughly \$70,000 price tag.

But Mr. Musk's interest in the market for alternative fuel vehicles represents just a small sliver of his larger vision.

To those who know him a bit better--and I did not know him better until just this week--Elon Musk is most famous for the scope of his imagination, for dreaming the impossible, and then setting about to achieve it.

Having successfully launched Tesla Motors, his foremost goal now is to establish a viable, human community on Mars, and to make humanity an interplanetary species.

To do this, he has founded a new company called SpaceX. And he's done this, in turn, because he truly believes that interplanetary travel is the key to achieving a sustainable future for the human race.

Clearly, this is no small goal. It has required him to invest nearly everything he has in achieving it. But the investment is paying off.

Despite several early failures -- SpaceX's first three test rockets flamed out and crashed spectacularly -- his company is making steady progress toward mastering the basics of space flight, which of course is not basic at all but rather extraordinarily complex.

How has he managed to do this?

Well, for one, he is blindingly wealthy and he is happy to invest his money not on building out his personal life, but on advancing the cause of reaching for the stars, of building a sustainable future for humanity itself.

So that's one reason. But he has also succeeded because he has embraced the Saint-Exubery model of community mobilization.

Mr. Musk understands that getting people to work for you, to help realize your dreams, can't just be about solving problems. It's got to be about something that makes you glad to be alive. Or that makes you come alive.

Because he believes you don't animate your dreams, your dreams animate you. In his case you teach people to long for the immensity of interplanetary space travel, to imagine that they might someday be crew members on the Starship Enterprise, whose mission is boldly go...

Mr. Musk also understands that most people harbor more modest dreams. So, to the rest of us he offers this one tip for cultivating success in any endeavor:

Do what you love. Do what you believe in. If you need inspiring words to motivate you, don't do it. Don't invest your time, energy and money in that case, because if you need inspiring words to motivate you to do the work, you don't love it enough.¹

On a practical level, this is what that model of collective mobilization looks like:

Elon Musk has hired lots and lots of people and he has brought them together, working on one big team. But each one of them is tasked with doing the one thing they're best at doing. The one thing they're good at doing. The one thing they love doing.

I'm not sure that anybody anywhere would see in Mr. Musk's leadership style, or in the corporate culture of SpaceX, a model for building a sustainable future for the Church, large C, or even for our church.

And that's a pity. Because as I learned more about his approach to building a sustainable future for humanity, I realized two things. One, his approach appeals to some of our deepest yearnings, to our longing for adventure and discovery.

But I also realized that he's not the first person to practice it.

The text we read a moment ago is the closing passage of what I believe is -- and I've made this point before -- the most famous sermon ever preached.

¹ The foregoing information about Mr. Musk and his approach to leadership is drawn and compiled from several different interviews with him, all of which are available on YouTube.

There's a reason for this. The Sermon on the Mount is a work of massive, world-changing spiritual genius. It covers a stupendous range of topics.

It changes the rules of what the Lord requires of us. It does this by laying the groundwork for a new way to pray, a new way to give, a new way to believe, a new way to act, a new way to be faithful in the world, one free of guilt and anxiety, one open to wonder and to new possibilities for what faith means and looks like.

Taking all those things together, you might naturally assume this sermon is Jesus's masterwork, his magnum opus.

Given its scope, it does seem like the kind of thing that could only be imagined and delivered toward the end of one's ministry, when you can draw on a treasure trove of theological riches and spiritual insights that can only be acquired through decades of conscientious spiritual practice.

But that is not the case. Preaching this sermon is not the first thing Jesus says or does publicly, but it's close.

First, he is driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness to face a critical rite of passage, an intense personal trial. Sure enough, he passes the test with flying colors. He successfully faces down his greatest temptations.

But it seems like it might have cost him. Immediately afterward he learns that John the Baptist has been arrested and it gives him pause.

Maybe it's because he's been weakened by hunger. Maybe it's because his soul is depleted by having to face down repeated temptations.

Or maybe it's simply because he realizes that it's dangerous to speak the truth. That it can and likely will cost you.

Whatever the reason, he withdraws when he hears the news about John. My guess is he spends some time pondering whether he really wants to do this. Whether he really is up to the task of serving as God's incarnate emissary to the world.

But in the end, he decides he is up to it, because he slowly starts to step out onto the public stage. His emergence reminds a little bit of, say, how Bruce Springsteen got his start, playing in little clubs just to practice his craft and garner some experience.

He preaches in a series of small synagogues in dusty little towns, workshopping his message, refining his technique, developing his craft as a preacher and teacher.

But then, again perhaps a bit like Bruce Springsteen, he realizes that whatever it is he's called to do, he can't do it alone.

And so he recruits a team, his own small band of disciples. It's just twelve guys -- or so history and the Bible would have us believe. But let's remember, both history and the Bible were largely written by men, and they are mostly about men.

So even though they're not named, you've got to believe a bunch of women were involved too, because let's be honest, women get stuff done, often much more effectively than men do.

In any case, this little team he's pulled together is his version of SpaceX. Except that for his part, Jesus was not out to build a ship that could ply the immensity of the sea, or even a space craft that can take humanity to Mars.

His overarching goal, his singular purpose, the mission that informed his entire ministry, was to build the kingdom of God, to institute the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven.

And to show the world what that realm looks like in the here and now: a global community devoted to making peace and centered on the practice of boundary-breaking love, a covenant community where everyone is valued and welcomed and accepted, where wounds are lovingly tended to, where hopes are nourished and the hungry are fed and strangers are welcomed.

And so, having polished his message and developed his craft, he climbs up on a small hill and, standing before the largest crowd yet, he delivers a sermon for the ages. I mean that literally. For the ages. We still say the prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

We still draw on this sermon for our understanding of Christian ethics. We look to it to remind us that in the commonwealth of God, it is the poor and the peacemakers who are blessed.

Hearing it anew jolts us into remembering that we are called to love not just our neighbors but even our enemies.

In times of anxiety and stress, it invites us to consider the lilies of the field, which neither toil nor spin and yet they flourish, and to remember that God loves us vastly more than God loves these beautiful flowers.

And here is how Jesus sums up this extraordinary sermon:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The 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.

Yes, the Sermon on the Mount is a blueprint for building out the reign of God, for building out a global community of faith that will endure through the centuries.

But to do that, if you want to participate in this sacred building campaign, you can't just listen. You've got to act. Faith is no longer just about belief in God, or even about worshiping God. It's about putting what you believe into action.

To the crowd who heard this sermon in full that day, it must have seemed like Jesus was describing the immensity of the sea, and inviting them to join him as they set sail across it.

Because from that day on big crowds followed him everywhere.

Admittedly, our goals are less ambitious than building a sustainable future for humanity or founding a global community of faith that will endure through the centuries.

But they are about building a sustainable future for ourselves, a community of faith right here in this valley, an outpost of the kingdom of God that will endure through time.

These goals are rooted in the question of what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be. Which is another way of saying, they are meant to answer the question, in our time and place, of what exactly the Lord does require of us.

In reaching for these goals it is our hope that we will build a local community much like the one Jesus imagined for the world:

A place where everyone is loved, welcome and cared for, where we engage our neighbors in acts of compassion and service.

Where we strive make peace and do justice; where the hungry are fed, and the broken are made whole; where hope, when it's lost, is restored; where our minds are challenged and our souls are nourished.

It's why our plan, and our hope, is ultimately to stop trying to *drum up people to collect wood and assigning everyone tasks and work to do.*

And instead, it's centered on inviting all of us to do what you love and to give what you can. Because if we all do that, then we might actually reach the stars.

Amen.