

How Firm a Foundation – Sasha Gerritson

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Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh God, our strength and redeemer, Amen.

How firm a foundation. A foundation. Foundation of a building, A non profit foundation, a Foundation garment, a house foundation, a cornerstone. The foundation in music is the Bass note of a chord. The root of a chord. The roots of trees, a house built on rock, a house built on sand, the three little pigs...

These were connections my brain started making when I began working on this text. How firm we can be, or how secure we can feel, is directly related to the ground beneath us. Is it shaking? Is it solid? Do we feel like we are going to slip? Or do we have on our awesome hiking shoes with a few ski poles? Do we have the information we need to make good decisions? GOD decisions?

It begs the question, how can we be fully “whole”, with a W, in keeping with Pastor Carol’s sermon series on WHOLENESS, if our foundation of faith isn’t strong? How can we answer God’s call and do God’s work if we aren’t grounded and secure in our faith or in our relationship with God?

“How Firm a foundation” is a Christian hymn published in 1787 by John Rippon. The theme of this hymn is the solid or firm foundation that God provides us in a turbulent world. And 232 years later, we still live in a turbulent world, so it still makes sense.

The composer rejoices in the fact that no matter what the circumstances we find ourselves in, we can rely upon the solid foundation of the Lord to keep us calm and encouraged. Legend has it that on Christmas Eve 1898, one hundred and eleven years after it was written, American soldiers engaged in the Spanish American war joined together to sing this hymn, The members were from the North and the South. Bringing them together in a way that few other things could. They sang:

“How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word. What more can he say than to you he has said, who unto the savior, for refuge has fled.”

Perry Fisher is a person of great faith here in Park Ridge. He is a worship leader, or “Reader”, as they call it in the Christian Science Church. He is a friend to many of us and an all around great guy.

Perry and I served together on a non profit cultural arts board (or foundation, if you will) for many years. A lover of great music, I met him through Kent Wehman.

In my early 30's (like last week) Perry and I would meet and talk . He would mentor me. I would ask him about Christian Scientist stuff, as I knew nothing about it. Like really nothing about it, and I was curious.

I was intrigued that we sang some of the same hymns and believed in a lot of the same stuff. He told me that their founder, Mary Baker Eddy, was strongly influenced by her Congregationalist upbringing. Just like the founders of our church, PRCC.

We would talk and talk over lunches and I would ask questions and never feel stupid or silly for asking. That was a great gift he gave me.

But I'll never forget the day he asked me what I prayed for. I was surprised into silence. I felt like I did at my graduate school comprehensive exams, on the hot seat! After I came up for air, I answered "what do I pray for? Well, there's a huge list. Homeless people, people being persecuted, people in crisis, countries at war, people without food, people in abusive situations..." you know, stuff like that." And Perry smiled that Perry smile and said "you really want to help people, Sasha, I can see that. And you are. That's a good thing." I smiled back, feeling like I had passed the test. And then he said "but what about you? What about yourself? Do you pray for yourself? For God to help you?" My immediate knee jerk answer was "Oh no, of course not. There are sooooo many people in much greater need, how could I ever waste God's precious time on me?"

He was quiet for minute and then he calmly explained that I needed to pray for God's strength and guidance for myself above all. I was shocked. Overwhelmed. I almost started to cry. Why? Why would I EVER pray for myself first? How DARE I? I have so much and need for nothing. I should pray to GOD for ME? No way. There are so many people in real pain, real crisis, how could I ever ask for God to turn His attention away from them to deal with me feeling fat or having low self esteem issues or whatever. I mean seriously.

He told me I had to. I simply must. That I needed to be strong to help others. You know like putting on your own oxygen mask first before helping others. That I needed to be grounded in my faith and secure in my relationship with God in order to truly answer God's call to help other people. He was right.

Verse 2 of the hymn has these words:

Fear not I am with thee, oh be not dismayed, For I am thy God and will still give thee aid. I'll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

Of course this is based on Isaiah 41:10, Fear not, I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteousness.

Yes, but... praying for myself seems difficult. Feels difficult. IS difficult.

Sometimes I get stuck thinking too much about all of it. Things I would maybe ask for God's help with, but they seem so trivial, so ridiculous, but still hurt my feelings or whatever.

Do you know what I mean by that? For example, when someone snubs you in the hallway at work (translation: why does he hate me?) or seemingly passively aggressively copies your boss on a snippy email (why are they trying to get me fired, aren't I doing a good enough job?), or explodes in your face about something soooo silly (what did I do to upset them so much? OMG I must be a horrible person). Oh, I torture myself with this stuff! All. The. time.

Then I remember back about 10 years ago, approximately in the same time period, to the sage words of advice from my friend, and then co-worker, Marie Clapper. She said "Sasha, that wasn't about you, not at all. That person is drowning, they can't help it." Seeing my perplexed look, she continued: "You know, just imagine, you're standing in water that's up to your knees, and someone pours in another cup or two of water. Ok, no big deal."

"But now imagine you're standing in water that's up to your nose and a little above. You're tilting your head back in order to breathe. And someone pours in a cup of water and you can't take it, you literally can't take one more thing. That's drowning. Emotional or spiritual drowning. So just think of it that way, Sasha," she said, "maybe that person is drowning. And Maybe...just maybe, it had absolutely nothing to do with you. Their own lives are overwhelming them and they are simply crying out in pain and desperation, in the form of passive aggressive behavior." In fact, I believe you shouldn't take it as something to be upset about, but rather take it as a sign of great trust that they feel safe enough to be vulnerable in your presence. And you know, then later just go home and pour a glass of wine and toast to their health or something. "Oh Marie! I miss you!"

This was the time period on my life when I came up with the expression that many of you have heard me say a million times "May this be the worst thing that happens to us today". Marie helped me find perspective. She helped me get centered and grounded, so I could be strong help others.

YES, Perry Fisher and Marie Clapper taught great lessons back then, lessons which I still think about almost everyday. I've pondered those times in my life when I was drowning. We've all been. Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and give a stern talking to my former self. But no, ... younger Sasha wouldn't have listened.

I think back to our scripture lessons from earlier. “Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them I will show you what he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against the house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears my words and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground or sand without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell and the ruin of that house was great.”

Or...

“Therefore my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.” “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will again say, rejoice. Do not be anxious about anything. But in everything by prayer let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will be made known to you.

I think about that in times of trouble. I know when I’m in a place of personal strength when I can realize that it’s NOT all about me.

Another verse of How Firm a foundation says this:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not thee overflow. For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless. And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

Based on Isaiah 43:2

“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fires of oppression, you will not be burned up. The flames will not consume you.”

Ok, I think I’m getting it. We need a firm foundation of faith, but we also need to trust that God will be with us and keep us safe, no matter what.

Can you think of some times in your life when your foundation was not firm, but you went ahead anyways? Times when you wish you could go back and give that younger version of you some help and advice?

And what about praying for ourselves? Does it feel awkward for you? Or are you ok with it? WE can’t change the past, but we can help affect our future.

SO I invite you to try an experiment with me. I invite you to consider praying for your FUTURE self. Not only in your heart, but on paper. What wisdom can you impart today, at this moment to your future self. Could you write a prayer or a few words of loving encouragement? Could you see some trouble coming down the road

and offer some perspective on it? At the end of each pew there are some half sheets of paper, envelopes and pens/pencils. Would you take one Write yourself a short prayer or letter? And seal it inside the envelope. Address the envelope to your own home address. And some time in the future, maybe six months from now, when we've all forgotten about this day and moved on to a million other things, we will put them in the mail. Your future self will get a letter or prayer or piece of loving encouragement from your past self. Seal the envelope, no one will ever see what's inside except you. Just make sure it has your home mailing address on the front. Drop it in the offering plate or give it to me or Liz afterwards and we will take it from there.

Allow me to leave you with this thought. "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus name. On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand."

"In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you." AMEN.