

An Open Book

By Bill Danz

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Jesus says, "Everyone who hears these words...and acts on them will be like the wise man who built his house on rock."

Rock is not the easiest place to build. Rock is hard.

Sand is probably a lot easier. Sand is soft. Sand is warm in the sun. Sand is probably a lot closer to the beach. Location, location, location...

Ok, He wasn't giving advice on architecture, construction or zoning.

Describing these verses, Swedenborg writes, "This statement of the Lord makes it clear that doing good things is worshipping the Lord."

Ok I thought, I can work with that, early on as I prepared this talk. It was only sometime later, checking the source material that I realized the context – these are the closing verses of The Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount. I am trying to create my first sermon based on The Sermon on the Mount?

I admit to be somewhat biblically-challenged but I know enough of the Bible to know – this is a big enchilada. This is "Blessed be the peacemakers", "Salt of the earth", "Lilies of the field", "Seek and ye shall find", "Do unto others". It's got The Lord's Prayer for chrissakes. (I guess that's for our sakes, But you get my drift.)

I'd procrastinated enough and thought there was no way could I tackle this. Later, becalmed a bit I realized, maybe I could just nibble on the edges.

Everyone who hears these words...

And I have heard these words and words like them here, in this place.

And it's a nice place we have here.

17 years and one week ago Ann and I got married right here. I stood here and said words of lasting significance. Since then, for the spiritual nourishment from the words I have heard in this place, I am so grateful.

What seems like little things become much bigger things.

In a sermon, Rev. Rachel once listed guidelines for living each day. The first one was very simple – start each day with an affirmation, echoing the message in that Hassidic poem from the first reading.

“This is a day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” From Psalm 118 - that works. These little things work, even if I don't use them the first thing.

Actually, the closest to a religious sentiment I've come to first thing in the morning is, “Holy Jesus, look at the time.”

But as a tool during the day -

Stuck in traffic when you really have to be somewhere,

This too is a day the lord has made

When the plumber doesn't show up,

Let us rejoice

When a pile of dishes hits the floor on the way from table to sink,

Even after I told them to make two trips they were trying to carry too much,

And be glad in it

Now get the broom.

A life has its trials and tribulations, its slings and arrows. I am starting to see how learning to deal with the little things starts to shape much bigger things.

And of course there is this place, this wonderful space that keeps drawing me back.

Still, there is something more than the sum of the parts, a message so much more than the medium. It made me think – what if I was in another place...

What if, instead of sitting on a handmade chair a century old, I sat on an old metal folding chair, my feet resting on cracked linoleum tiles.

Instead of a wall with muted pastoral landscapes painting a subtle change of seasons, the wall is cinder block that for far too many seasons hasn't seen a fresh coat of paint.

Instead of looking out onto a garden sanctuary, the windows overlook a vacant lot, litter strewn and bounded by chain link.

Instead of a ceiling lifted high by sturdy trunks, there is an old drop tile ceiling, sagging and jaundiced, stained from leaky pipes.

Instead of this charred dove, salvaged by Rev. Worcester from the ruins of the 1906 earthquake to become a symbol of survival and perseverance, there on a shelf is little more than a crumpled styrofoam cup, debris left from a meeting the night before.

Not the same place. A very different place.

Yet, at the front of this other room, there is a table. And on this table, there is an open book.

That book.

Swedenborg writes, “The Bible is Divine revelation. Everything that comes from the Divine goes down through the heavens all the way to the people on earth. Our connection to heaven, happens through the Bible.”

An open book that has that power to connect to the Divine – to the source of Truth and Love – and a power in the message that can make the connection every bit as strong – from place to place and from person to person.

That is quite a book.

Through the years I have found the Bible challenging, intimidating, baffling, at times, even irrelevant. But in this place I have found a resonance to some frequency deep inside.

As a slogan, “What happens here, stays here” may work for the Las Vegas Visitors Bureau. But not this place. Now I am trying to maintain that connection beyond the corner of Lyon and Washington.

In my life to come rains will fall, floods will come, and winds will blow to test my choices and measure my progress at securing that foundation and making that connection.

In Swedenborg, Rock corresponds to Truth, the Divine Truth of the Word, and faith from charity. Acting on what you hear is building your life on the eternal Rock of God’s Word, God’s Truth.

Hearing but not acting is faith without charity, Truth without Love – building only on sand.

To that I would add...

Building on rock is hard.

Jesus understands the challenge

The freedom is to make a choice that is not always the easy one. It is not a simple, common sense choice like the wise man gets in out of the rain. The choice is not just a measure of wisdom or foolishness but one of effort and difficulty.

The Sermon on the Mount raises the bar on so many things, not the least of which are compassion and charity, forgiveness and tolerance.

Building on rock is hard.

To build on rock, you need time – time measured not in days but a life.

To build on rock, you need help – from your loved ones and community, just as much as they need yours.

To build on rock, you need some special tools -
Like the type you can find
In an open book.

Amen

First Reading:

Take special care to guard your
Tongue before the morning prayer.
Even greeting your fellow, we are told,
Can be harmful at that hour.
A person who wakes up in the morning is
like a new creation.
Begin your day with unkind words,
Or even trivial matters –
Even though you may later turn to prayer,
You have not been true to your creation.
All of your words each day
Are related to one another.
All of them are rooted
In the first words that you speak.

An old Hasidic poem, quoted in Sabbath, Restoring the Sacred Rhythm Of Rest
By Wayne Muller

Second Reading:

Matthew 7.24-27

Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the 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. And 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. The rain fell and the floods came and the wind blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall.