

“A Letter from Scott and Nellie”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, February 19, 2006

Text: Psalm 27:1-14 Matthew 7:24-27 NRSV

Introduction: This is an unusual sermon because it is based on a letter that my wife, Melody, and I received last month. It is a different kind of sermon. Some of the letter is sad. Some parts are tragic. Other parts are inspiring. I believe it presents a topic that is one of the most important subjects I could ever preach about. So please listen carefully. Please give it your prayerful attention and allow God to speak to you through it.

Prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds today to receive your truth. Then empower us to obey it. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Jesus once told his disciples that a person who hears his words and acts on them is like a wise man who built his house on rock for a foundation. The rains fell. The floods came. The wind blew and beat on that house. But it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

A person who hears Jesus’ words and does not act on them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rains fell. The floods came. The wind blew and beat against that house. It fell with a great crash.

In a Serendipity Bible study, there is this multiple-choice question on this passage: What is Jesus promising those who are willing to live by his words?

- a. You will never experience storms. Is that the answer?
- b. You will experience the same storms as everyone else.
- c. You will get a new house if the old one collapses.
- d. The storms won't destroy your faith. Bingo! This is it.

Build your life on the rock of faith in Jesus Christ. When the storms come, your house will not fall.

I know a couple who built their lives on the rock. The foundation of their lives is faith in Jesus Christ. Last year they experienced some terrible storms – with torrential rains and howling winds. Their house did not fall because its foundation was on the rock of Christ.

For you to understand this sermon, I need to go back in time about 25 years. I'm a student at Duke Divinity School. Scott and Nellie Cloninger are also students at Duke Divinity School. Scott is from South Carolina, and Nellie is from Pennsylvania. They met at Duke and were married. When they are not involved in field education assignments, they attend Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. In fact, Nellie taught the middle school Sunday School class for awhile. Ed Smith is the pastor here. Melody and I also attend Duke Memorial United Methodist Church.

During my final year of seminary, Scott and Nellie, Melody and I and one other couple are in a Bible study group. We meet once a week for the entire academic year. As a result, we become very close. Scott and Nellie are both very committed Christians. They strongly feel God's call upon their lives.

We graduate from Duke. Scott and Nellie are appointed to United Methodist churches in South Carolina. Melody and I move to Rocky Mount where I am appointed

to serve a church. About a year after they graduate, Scott and Nellie have a son. They name him John Scott. About the time our son, Andy is born, Scott and Nellie have another son, named Franklin. It is an exciting time. We have photographs of Franklin and Andy as toddlers. Several years pass by. Scott and Nellie have a daughter, named Patricia, and we have a daughter named Sarah. Our families are growing. We have photographs of Patricia and Sarah together as infants.

Every year we mail a Christmas card to Scott and Nellie with a letter updating them on our happenings. They mail a card and letter to us. This year their letter is late.

Today Scott and Nellie are both United Methodist pastors who live in upstate South Carolina. Their oldest son, John Scott, is now 23. Franklin is 20, the age of our son, Andy. Patricia is 16, the age of our daughter, Sarah. She is a junior in high school. Nellie is writing the letter. With Scott and Nellie's permission, I am going to share part of their letter with you.

“This year continued in rather routine ways until March when Franklin . . . asked his girlfriend of two years, Natalie Payne, to marry him. She agreed, and they set their wedding date for December 17, 2005. In July, John Scott, asked his girlfriend, Beth Wally to marry him, and she said yes. They set their wedding date for June 10, 2006.

“(In September) John Scott told Nellie that he thought he needed to see a doctor because he stayed dizzy all the time. He said, “It is getting really hard to drive!” Nellie made a doctor's appointment for him. They took blood work, an EKG and x-rays. The blood work was somewhat irregular. An MRI was ordered, and we waited anxiously for results.

“In the meantime his symptoms got worse, and he had to miss his Clemson University classes because he said it wasn’t safe to drive. He was feeling so ill that Scott and Nellie adjusted their schedules to make sure that someone was at home with him all the time.

“On October 9 and 10, Scott and Patricia went to visit Scott’s parents. Nellie and John Scott would have probably gone, too, but our family doctor had promised to call with the results of the MRI on the 10th. We both sat at home anxiously waiting for the telephone to ring, but never dreaming of the call we would receive from Scott that morning. When John Scott answered the telephone, his dad told him there had been a collision. Scott said, “Pop was gone! Mom was in shock. Patricia was moaning, but not talking, so at least she was alive.” Then he said, “Please come now. I need you!” Despite his dizziness, John Scott hopped up and started packing for everyone while Nellie started calling the appropriate people in our churches.

“It was a prayerful trip to the Chester County Hospital where we were met by Scott’s aunt, uncle and cousin. Franklin and Natalie arrived shortly after that. Nellie got to see Scott briefly as they were wheeling him to x-ray. It was so good to see him and touch him, even if he was bloody and coated with glass.

“The coroner asked to speak with Nellie and began talking about a death certificate. They brought in a special team to reconstruct the accident. They took blood from the body of Scott’s father, to answer questions about whether he was impaired in any way by medication he may have been taking. The coroner stated that a telecommunications truck had lost control. The rear of the truck and a trailer it was

pulling loaded with a huge spool of cable had hit his dad's minivan head on. Scott's dad was killed instantly. Scott had serious injuries, but they were not life threatening.

“Patricia had already been transported to the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte because she was so traumatized. She had been sitting behind Scott's dad on the driver's side of the minivan. She was talking to the medics, but her answers were not always ‘appropriate.’ They were getting Scott's mother ready to transport to the same medical center and wanted a family member to ride along in the ambulance because of her Alzheimer's Disease. John Scott rode with his grandmother.

“The coroner and the highway patrol officer kept talking about going to court. It seemed like such a foolish conversation when our daughter's life and Scott's mother's life were hanging in the balance. Once it was decided that Scott would be kept at Chester County Hospital for observation, Franklin and Natalie volunteered to stay with Scott, and someone drove Nellie to Carolinas Medical Center. When Patricia came out of surgery, she was put on a ventilator in order to keep her so heavily sedated that she would not remember the excruciating pain she would be living through. The trauma intensive care unit nurses said that they had learned that patients actually recovered better when they could not remember the pain.

“Scott's mother had two spots of bleeding in her brain, but became stable enough to be moved out of neuro ICU after 24 hours. Scott was released from the hospital with stitches in his head and a swollen left leg. We got results from John Scott's MRI. He had a fluid cyst in his spinal cord and a spot on his pituitary gland that could be hemorrhaging or a cyst. John Scott requested to have the surgery on December 19, after he was the best man for Franklin's wedding.

“Patricia moved out of the trauma intensive care unit on October 24. She was admitted to pediatric progressive care for 3 nights and then moved to the Charlotte Institute of Rehabilitation. When the rehab doctor met her, she asked Patricia what her goals were. Patricia answered, “To be at my uncle’s house for Thanksgiving.” She made it! Patricia worked hard. She had her last surgery – skin grafts to her left hand and wrist – on November 19, and was discharged on November 20.

“On December 15 we had a beautiful ice storm in South Carolina. Both Trinity United Methodist Church, where we were having the wedding rehearsal party, and Pleasant View Wesleyan Church, where the wedding was to be held, did not have power. All of the musical instruments at the Wesleyan church were electronic. Franklin was able to obtain generators from the rental division at the hardware store where he works. We were hopeful the power would be on for the wedding, but it wasn’t. It was cold, and the bride and bridesmaids felt the cold the most. Everyone kept a beautiful spirit. Franklin and Natalie were married with lots of wonderful stories to tell in the years ahead.

“Franklin summed it up well when Nellie asked him before the wedding what he was thinking. He replied, “Mom, I’m loving this! Isn’t God good? God knew a long time ago about the ice storm, and here I am working where I could get enough generators to meet our need. Most people wouldn’t have access to this many generators at a time like this!” Scott, Nellie, and Natalie’s father, Jonathon, performed the ceremony. What a humbling and delightful experience it was to officiate our children making this holy covenant with each other and God. It was so wonderful to see Patricia walk down the aisle as a bridesmaid. She was disappointed to still be in the neck and arm braces, but to the rest of us, she was beautiful.

“Two weeks before the wedding John Scott had symptoms of a mini-stroke. We were very relieved when December 19 arrived, and he had decompression surgery. While the surgery went well, recovery has been slow and aggravating. John Scott is dealing with a constant headache and neck spasms.

“Still, this was the best Christmas I have ever had. Natalie and Franklin came and spent Christmas Eve with us. On Christmas Day we invited two people to share the day with us. One is a widow, the other is a student at Erskine seminary whose parents have died and who has no other family. After church and lunch, we all took a rest period, then had a bountiful Christmas supper together.

“We have been overwhelmed by the goodness of family and friends. We asked for cards and emails for Patricia, and many people responded. The staff at the rehab institute showed Nellie the mail for Patricia’s wing. Patricia often received more mail than all the other patients did together. Prayers of multitudes of people have given us so much sustenance and help. People have often said to us, ‘I want to help, but I don’t know what to do except pray.’ To us the most important thing anyone can do for us is PRAY!

“Patricia has been doing homebound school but will be returning to school fulltime on January 4. The doctor told her that this would be the worst semester of her life and to be gentle with herself, and accept her limitations. She will return to school with a wheelchair to move between classes, so she won’t be too exhausted to concentrate on her studies. She has a great deal of nerve damage to her left arm and lost her left thumb. She goes to Anderson twice a week for therapy. We also do therapy at home 3-4 times daily. The doctors tell us it may be 18 months or more before she is able to use the

left arm, if she is ever able to use it. Since she had two pages of injuries, we are grateful for all the progress she has made.

“As this year draws to a close, we are beginning to deal with our grief over the death of Scott’s father, and our anger with a telecommunications company who knew that their driver did not have a CDL license and that his regular license had been suspended the week before, and told him to drive anyway. It is easy to forgive, but we feel a responsibility to not let other people be put at risk by unqualified drivers and a company that didn’t seem to care. As you are remembering us in prayer, please remember our need to make wise decisions in the years ahead.

P.S. January 9 – John Scott is doing better now, but will not be able to return to school or work until after seeing the surgeon on January 17. Patricia has gotten back to school for two days. So far that is going well. She hopes to work at a Conference Council on Youth Ministries retreat this weekend.

With the joy of Christ’s grace, Scott, Nellie, John Scott and Patricia”

Now, I have to tell you that if I had gone through all of that and had arrived at my son’s wedding and there was no electricity, I probably would have looked up to heaven and asked, “What now, God?”

How could Scott and Nellie endure all of that tragedy in their family and then invite two other people over to their home for Christmas? I believe that it is because they had built their house on the rock of Christ.

Various storms in our lives can threaten us. There are intellectual doubts, moral failures, and relational conflicts with family, friends, or co-workers. There may be

personal crises like Scott and Nellie experienced, such as sickness, the death of a loved one, or losing a job. Another silent storm is creeping apathy with no purpose to living.

When faith in Christ is the foundation of your life, no storm will be able to blow your house down.

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way: (The Lord says): “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

(Isaiah 43:1-2)

The psalmist proclaims: “The Lord is my light and my salvation . . . The Lord is the stronghold of my life.” (Psalm 27:1)

What about you? What is the foundation you depend on? Is it your abilities? Your status? Is it wishful thinking? You really don't have a foundation if it is that. Is it self-confidence, or good health? Is it your family? Your money? Your faith in Christ?

When faith in Christ is the foundation of your life, the storms will not blow your house down.

Today I invite you to make Christ the foundation of your life, for the first time or to reaffirm your faith in him for the 1,000th time. I invite you to come and kneel at our chancel rail and pray to the Lord as we sing our next hymn. Frank and I will be praying on either end of the rail. If you would like one of us to pray with you, simply kneel or stand beside us.

The best foundation of all is faith in Christ. That is the foundation that will hold. Come and pray as we sing.