

Sermon by Pastor Dr. Julia Helmke, Hannover (Commissioner for Art and Culture in the Lutheran Church of Hannover, Haus kirchlicher Dienste)

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The grace of our lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

♪ Don't build your house on the Sandyland...

Many of us, including myself, just love to visit Sandyland in their holidays. To feel the fading sand under the bare feet, to collect seashells and marvellous stones along the shore, to watch peacefully the coming and going of the fugacious waves, and to see how kids are building joyfully their sand castle and the sea comes and gets it and they rebuild it again and again - it is perfect to get some distance from everyday life and also to reflect what is ephemeral in my life and what is a solid rock.

Holidays, time for holy days, are often a time and a chance of experiencing something different from our everyday life, following the German saying: „I am actually someone different but I can hardly show it“

And so some, who might have a clear, structured, regular life, are travelling abroad, eager to see, to learn, to experience new things, they indulge in other cultures and traditions, to open oneself for new horizons.

And others, who are always under pressure and normally running on the fast track, are longing for silence, allowing themselves to let go, to breathe slowly, to look not for outward attractions but inward sensations, listen to inner needs and longings.

When we expose ourselves to these new or very old experiences, holidays become holy days and deep and difficult questions might arise:

Where and how do I build my house of life, where do I ground myself or better: how do I find solid ground?

Sometimes we come home from holiday with some answers, then it is real present and a glimpse of Gods kingdom.

Sometimes we start searching when we are back in our "normal everyday life" like now just after the end of the summer holidays or take the chance in a service like today to reflect upon it.

The two biblical texts we just heard in our readings are both dealing with these two different ways towards life. On the one hand it is the witnessing example of Paul in his letter to the Philippians where he writes that he could proud and selfconfident of what he gained out of his roots and background, his formation and deeds, but that all is nothing compared to the joy and grace he finds in Jesus Christ. Paul's belief is that Jesus Christ is enrooting us, forming us, in order to follow his example. It is clearly a more receiving approach, full of confidence in God with hands and heart wide open. And on the other hand the parable of the talents in the gospel of Matthew where it is not enough and even negligent just to preserve our talents given by God but an strong appeal to actively use them, to search what is given to us and then deal with it in a clever way that bears fruit.

Between these two approaches we dwell and struggle:

Between the two poles of being active and let go, between planning, taking on responsibilities, taking sides and being creative, and the knowledge that it is not all in our hands and we are part of the creation but not creators ourselves.

The biblical text for the sermon today takes these two different attitudes towards life and towards God both in consideration. I read the gospel for this Sunday, from the gospel of St. Matthew in the Seventh Chapter - and after the hymn we just sung it is probably for some no surprise:

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

Dear brothers and sisters, these words of Jesus are the end of his great „Sermon on the Mount“, written in three chapters starting with the beatitudes and finishing with this striking picture of a house on a rock and a house on the sand.

I must admit that when I read this centerpiece of the New Testament for the first time(s), as an adolescent but as well later, I felt at the end almost a bit disappointed. After these impressive and challenging beatitudes, the golden rule, the Lord's Prayer, the revealing ethical question of „Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?“ I did find the image of house-building on rock and sandy nearly too simple and obvious. Who should be so stupid and build a house on sand? That is something you do just for fun as a kid during beach-holidays... And my second objection was the queer notion that also a house on the rock wouldn't be ideal, because - who would drill the foundation and the cellar in the rock?

Reading them again and again they became increasingly evident for me and this I would like to share with you: At first it became quite clear that these words of Jesus are not made for a discussion about architecture and fundamentals and how we as humans should decide and carefully plan about groundwork (that we have in a similar biblical text by Luke).

Jesus instead gives us a description of the two fundamental ways of human existence: To live a life where I have a solid foundation, where I am on firm ground or a life in permanent fear to be rushed off my feet and to lose ground, an experience we probably all had already to suffer once in our lifetime.

The choice between sand and solid rock are the two possibilities to spend one's own life— whereas it is clear that God in his love wants for us the solid rock and trusts us to be capable to choose the salvific shelter and not the sandy land with permanent fear of being swept away. So the gospel beneath his words is wonderful heartening news: Our foundations for a fulfilling life are laid, we don't have to do it ourselves, we just can be there.

But, and that is the crucial point, do we always know what is sandy land in our lives and what is a solid rock? We probably all know in our hearts that a bank account,

that money and human achievements alone are not the solid rock that can conquer the floods and winds in our one world.

Living and existing, also trying to live a Christian life is a continuing process and we have every given day again to struggle, if „this, that or the other decision“ is leading us more on the sandy land or more on the solid rock.

Again the symbolic picture of sand and solid rock are not isolated biblical verses – they belong to the whole sermon on the mount and are, against my first impressions a real strong conclusion. These three chapter, shape our faith, our behaviour and actions and our understanding of the relation between God and myself. They are the benchmark for our decisions.

Often it is said the demand of Jesus teaching in the sermon on the mount is to high, as a normal human being you cannot fulfil these high expectations of love of neighbour, the striving for peace and justice - but for us as Christians it is our guidance and what we are heading for.

I believe the teaching of the Sermon on the mount is demanding, but God trusts us in Jesus Christ that we are capable to do. And from these three chapters we get an orientation what is solid rock and what is Sandyland.

The gospel for today is a mission:

- a) It is a clear decision for the solid rock by following the teaching of Jesus and
- b) it is a permanent and loving invitation by Jesus to enter into the communication with God, to understand more and more what gives our individual existence and our world a solid foundation and what might seem look kind of nice but is not lasting at all.

In the last weeks there was a Swiss-based movie shown in the cinemas, a charming comedy called „Sommer Sand Traum“.And – without naming God or the bible – one can draw some explicit lines between the plot of the movie and the pictures Jesus gave to his disciples and us with the end of the Sermon on the mount. The story is a bit weird and a modern fairy tale, but fairy tales are often with deep truth in it...The story tells of Benno, an ordinary man in his Thirties. Working at a stamp dealer, being proud of his nice blond girl friend, cheating around for his own benefit and a kind of

conceited and carelessly to his surrounding. He loves Beethoven and is imagining himself as well known conductor and classical composer. A man struggling through life from day to day. And one day he wakes about in the morning and starts to loose sand. Sand is trickling, rolling out of his trouser legs and everywhere from his body. Of course he tries to hide it and to stop it, no chance. It is very crazy and funny to watch in the first moment for the movie audience. But for Benno it is dangerous as well, because the sand flood is especially strong when he is dreaming and so he is in danger to choke and drowned by sand. And with all the sand he is loosing much weight as well. He is loosing himself. So he looks for help, but the psychologist just notes: Interesting metaphor... No one believes him. Then he discovers that the sand stops when he is telling the truth and is being honest to himself and that the strange sand makes others drowsy. And so, step by step he starts facing his selfimage and his careless behaviour. He changes. He goes into reverse and at the end he even finds true love.

It did touch me, because I think the life, the house of life of Benno was quite built on Sandy land and still he had the possibility to change that and start another one, much more grounded. And that he took and appreciated that chance as well – what made the audience in the cinema laugh and cry.

I believe that God as well gives us again and again the possibility to discover our Sandylands and to change that. The biblical symbol of sand as (prophetic) sign to repent in this comedy is maybe not very likeable to happen, but – why not? God's love for us is not just everlasting but creative and surprising as well. So I do wish us that we belong to the people to “hear these words of God and do them”. That we aim for the solid rock and that we are open for God when (s)he shows us with proper sand or in thousand different ways to distinguish between rock and sandyland. And most of all that we know deep inside and feel it every morning again that God has already prepared for us our house of life that is firmly grounded. Amen.

Blessing:

May the Love of God surround you,

May the Grace of God astound you,

May the Hope of God ground you. AMEN