

“A Persistent Drip”
Matthew 7:21-29
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Preached June 1, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

I have a drip. Unlike other drips I’ve had, this one is not actively destroying anything except a good night’s sleep. Apparently, water is dripping off the edge of our roof and hitting the clear, polycarbonate roof we have over the back door with a very loud and steady beat. This is not a pleasant sounding tinkling of a drip, mind you, but a pervasive, heavy thunk of a drip that is even more annoying than the ticking of a clock when you are trying to fall asleep. Obviously this is a drip one only hears half the year, but as the rainy season has so evidently begun, I was reminded of my failure to rectify this same troublesome situation last year, and to wonder why I did not. And so I was challenged to fix it before I lost any more sleep over it again this year. So I got out my ladder and climbed up to investigate, only to discover that the offending drip is just out of my reach, and thus just out of my comfort zone, seeing as how I am afraid of heights. And so, for the moment, the drip has won, and I will have to call in reinforcements, at least in the form of a bigger ladder and someone to catch me when I fall. In the meantime, all I could do was put a thrice-folded bath towel on the roof to blunt the force of persistence.

I suppose I can afford to wax poetic about rain since my home is not in danger of being washed away in a flash flood, like the foolish man in Jesus’ message in Matthew or those in Myanmar a few weeks ago, or those here in Costa

Rica this week. Clearly, Jesus is speaking not about one's physical dwelling place, but about one's spiritual house being built in the right place, and with the right materials, and the metaphor works because real houses do get washed away, and when they do, it is a spectacular catastrophe: the house fell, Jesus says, "and great was its fall." In that fall are consequences, grave and life threatening consequences, and thanks be to God that the dwellings of the majority of us in this room are safe from such a washout. Indeed, we have the luxury of thinking about preventing the more insidious and less obvious ways in which water will damage our homes: through mold, and decay, and rot, brought about not by floods, but by unattended drips. Dealing with mold and rot may be expensive and annoying, but at least they are generally not house-threatening in the sudden, catastrophic sense.

In the same way, it will be the unattended drips in our spiritual lives, more often than the flash floods, which will damage our spiritual houses, and can potentially lead to ruin. To be sure, sometimes we are washed over by unexpected tragedy or loss, but those things happen far less frequently than the steady beat of a persistent and unattended drip, whose ability to worm its way into our souls starts the decay that makes us structurally weak, uninhabitable, or at least inhospitable. When Flora and I moved into the family homestead when we arrived in Costa Rica, it was clear that preventing the entrance of water was not a high priority for the previous occupants. At times, the smell of mildew was truly oppressive, and the work required to keep our clothes mold-free was never-ending. It may have

taken decades more in the case of this house for it to fall down from water damage, but it wasn't a healthy place to live, or somewhere you would want to invite guests. It wasn't a flood that left it that way. It was unattended drips. I suppose what I am trying to say is that at least for me, if not for most of us here tonight, it doesn't help a whole lot to reflect on where to locate my spiritual house to keep it safe from a flood which will obliterate it, but rather how to waterproof it so it can truly be a home for Christ and others. I may be guilty of a form of spiritual hubris to think that my spiritual house is not located in a flood plain, but I am also wise enough to know that I don't live where it doesn't rain.

Matthew was writing to a group of newer Christians, people who may not have known just where to build as they moved outside the spiritual village of their upbringing, whether Jewish or Gentile. They didn't have Sunday School programs in which they were nurtured, nor centuries of faith affirming tradition and theology to guide them, nor a culture in which religious differences were tolerated. They were starting from scratch and building in unmapped areas. And so Matthew goes to great lengths to share with them the teachings of Jesus that would give them the firmest possible foundation. For them, the Sermon on the Mount was filled with the bricks that would make a sturdy spiritual house, if they would only put them in the right place. For us, however, the Sermon on the Mount is also filled with great waterproofing techniques, spiritual caulk and new gutters if you will, to make our houses homes. Tonight's lesson is the conclusion of all that great wisdom, and as

Jesus makes clear, it's all about doing *something* with what one has learned, and not only that, but doing the *right* thing. And so let's take a look at how we might drip-proof ourselves.

Tonight's passage begins with a sobering assessment of our claims to righteousness. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Well, that certainly seems fair enough, except that Jesus continues by saying, "On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" Yikes! If prophecy, and casting out demons, and doing great deeds of power are not "the will of my father in heaven," then what is? I mean, those are big ticket items, the kinds enjoyed by truly spiritual people! The answer lies, I think, in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, as does locating and repairing the drips in our lives.

If we are to be doers of the word and not just hearers, wise people who build in the right spot, and yet do not have prophecy, exorcism, and deeds of great power at our disposal, with what are we left? Let me suggest that we will have plenty to do by concentrating on compassion, humility, and repentance. That is because the first three things are roughly equivalent in the Christian life to what Jesus warned against in the Pharisaic life. Though not exclusively, these things lend themselves to being done for show, to be seen in public, to climb the social ladder of religion.

It is not as if they are things we should not do, but rather they are only part of what we should do. They seem to fall under the heading Jesus uses of “Beware of practicing your piety before others to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Consider what Jesus says about fasting. He does not condemn fasting, but rather fasting with a disfigured face. Consider what he says about prayer: He does not condemn prayer, but rather prayer done so that others can see. Consider what he says about almsgiving: He extols it, but not if it is done announced by the sound of a trumpet. What seems to go unsaid in Jesus’ diminishment of prophecy, exorcism, and deeds of great power, is the manner in which they are done, like the prayer, fasting and almsgiving critiqued earlier: in name only. We did these things in your name, Jesus, as if making sure Jesus’ name was attached to their deeds was more important than the deeds themselves.

So let me suggest that the first dangerous, rot-producing, mold-inducing drip is the drip of self-aggrandizement, or perhaps it is better to call it self-promotion, the use of even part of the gifts of God for one’s own purposes, rather than fully for those for whom they were intended. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus suggests being more righteous than the Pharisees, and although that might not seem so difficult given their self-righteousness, obviously it is pretty challenging. The challenge is to let *God* shine, rather than ourselves. But from time to time we use the name of Jesus to get ahead, to make ourselves feel comforted or

even smug, to show we are aligned with God. And in so doing, we are allowing destructive forces to make their way into us, making us weaker and less hospitable.

As tonight's passage is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, looking back through it will reveal some of the other drips that damage our spiritual houses. Another drip is the drip of self-underestimation, perhaps the opposite of the first drip, but just as dangerous. If one tendency is to use God's gifts as our own, another is to avoid using them at all, for fear that we are somehow not worthy of them. Jesus calls his disciples to account for this drip when he reminds them not to hide their light under a bushel basket, nor to lose their saltiness, nor fail to persevere non-violently in the face of torture and abuse. In each of these examples, we open ourselves to rot and decay by denying what we have to offer the world in Jesus' name, as the suffering of others eventually takes its toll on us too.

A final drip I would suggest is the drip of self-reliance, the tendency to think we can make it without God's help, or according to our own resources. When Jesus tells the disciples they cannot serve two masters, God and wealth, he is speaking to this drip. You cannot be secure, he is saying, when you place your security in something inherently insecure! What's more, what God has to offer is ready for the taking, if we will only ask for it, rather than relying on our own ability to provide. "Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." These are not instructions to work harder. They are directions to work smarter, to seek wisdom and aid from the right source, rather than toiling

away under the illusion of self-sufficiency. Another insidious drip, undermining our spiritual homes. Our steadfastness to Jesus' instructions, in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, are easily enough eroded by a lack of diligence. There will always be rain in our lives, and thus the drips that find their way in through the exposed places in our lives. A drip can bore a hole in rock, it can carve out a canyon, given enough time. What choice do we have but to prevent them before they destroy? I have a drip. Do you?

Well, even as we reflect on the destructive nature of drips, I want to leave you with a least one positive image of drips as we prepare to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. That image comes from the subterranean world. If you've ever visited a cave, or even just learned about them, you will have marveled at the stalactite and stalagmite formations found within. These formations are the newest inhabitants of a cave, because they aren't the rock of the cave walls themselves, but are rather formed later, over time, by drips and droplets of water that carry minerals that collect little by little until they form these magnificent columns. Perhaps we have a geologist among us who can correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that the minerals that create these stalactites and stalagmites, the minerals carried by the water, come from the same rock of the cave that contains them. The drips of the cave carve away the minerals that in turn create these formations. I share this image because I believe that God forms us in much the same way, adding to us little by little until we reach a mature beauty. But our substance is the

righteousness of those who have gone before us, the righteousness to which Jesus exhorted them in the Sermon on the Mount, a righteousness we bequeath to others who will come after us, as we live as we have been taught. May our Communion tonight help build us to a mature beauty in the grace and righteousness of those with whom we share this meal through time and space. Amen.