

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

"What then are we to say about these things?"

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Homecoming Sunday, September 9, 2007

Luke 14: 28-30

Luke 14: 28-30²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, you have gathered us together from the far corners of our summer travels and brought us safely home. Although we are one family, we find ourselves at different places in life. Some of us, O God, face important decisions and await a diagnosis or surgery that is coming soon. Some of us feel stressed out and overwhelmed by work and family and life in general. Some of us are looking for a place to belong, searching for true friends in whom we can confide. Some of us are hoping to have children and wondering if that will ever happen. Some of us feel both the pressure of aging parents and the demands of our children, and we are sandwiched in between. Some of us are waiting for a life partner, a loved one, with whom we can share our lives. And some of us have life by the tail, and life is going our way. Wherever we are, O God, inspire us to be living examples of Christ's love. To that end, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, that by some miracle of your grace, my words might become your living word, your life giving word for us this day. It is in the name of Jesus Christ, the risen and the reigning Christ that we pray, Amen.

If you have been around the church for the past few weeks and months, you may have heard Bart Simpson's familiar refrain among our staff and dedicated volunteers alike: "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" If the hole in the front yard of the church the size of a swimming pool is a clue, the answer is no. We are not there yet. We are close, but we are not there yet. Even when the building is completely done, the opportunity lies before us, and an amazing opportunity it is—to make this building, this tower above Greenwich Avenue, a sign for all to see that God is alive and well in Greenwich.

This morning I want to share with you some stories about how I see God at work in their lives of our children and youth. In our new building I see the opportunity to expand the vibrant children and youth ministry that we already have and help secure a foundation of faith in each child's life that will last a lifetime.

In ten year's time, our new building will be truly finished when the youth of Greenwich would rather spend Sunday nights in our kitchen cooking and serving meals for a community kitchen than hanging out at the bottom of the avenue. Our building will truly be complete when First Presbyterian church is

known among youth in this town as the only place to be. When this is the place "where everyone knows your name," then we will know that our building is complete. Until then, you and I have more work to do.

As most of you know, this summer I had the privilege of taking both our junior and senior high youth groups on mission trips. For a week, the junior high served a community of people in Rutland, Vermont who, on the surface might have appeared less needy than others. Rutland, VT is about an hour away from Lake George, NY. Rutland is filled with fast food restaurants, and boasts both a Walmart, a Kmart, and a Dollar Store. Our group spent the first three days at a nursing home, one block from the Dunkin Donuts. We spent most of our time on the Alzheimer's Unit. We enjoyed setting up a Fourth of July carnival and helping the residents through a series of games-- a ring toss, shuffleboard, and a bean bag toss. One of the residents, a war veteran named Albert, had great difficulty getting the disks to slide down the shuffleboard table to win a prize. After repeated attempts, the disk would stop just a few inches from his hand. The table was not long, but the four feet seemed an imposing task for Albert. We tried maneuvering his wheelchair one way and then the other, but Albert had only one arm. One of our

confirmands, Randy Peterson, took his hand, and said, "Try flicking it with your finger, it worked for someone else." And Albert did. The disk went shooting down the table and into a slot. After that, Albert got 8 out of the next 10 disks in the slots. He didn't want to quit.

One of our confirmands, Carter Yagemann later said, "This is not my grandfather, but this is someone's grandfather. In fact, this was my grandmother before she died earlier this year in a care facility. I hope someone came to visit my grandmother in California when we were not there to see her every day." **What are we to say about Carter's statement and how we should treat our elderly members?** We need to be especially careful to remember those in our church family who are shut in, limited in mobility, and separated from our worship services. We have an incredible opportunity before us to reach out to our senior members and extend to them the loving caring hands of fellowship. Carter's statement reminds us that this is not just the duty of the senior's fellowship committee. This building is specially equipped to be accessible to all people, with walkers and canes, and wheelchairs. My prayer is that our seniors will gather here on a weekly basis for fellowship, spiritual growth, and delicious meals. May this be your home away from home.

Later that week in Rutland, VT we prepared a house just off the main drag for painting. It wasn't just anyone's house, it was the house of Irene, one of the nicest women you would ever hope to meet. Irene and her husband had lived in their two story white clapboard house for sixty-four years. Her husband Buddy was an auto mechanic and worked one street over at the repair shop. Irene has four boys, all grown now with families of their own. Her youngest son lives within an hour's distance and looks in on her regularly. This January, Irene came downstairs to wash her face and get ready for bed and found her husband Buddy dead in his chair while watching TV. To make matters worse, at Buddy's funeral, Irene had a stroke and was now confined to a wheelchair.

We took turns scraping Irene's house to prepare it for painting, and when we got tired we would talk to her. She liked to sit on her porch and watch. Irene was quite a talker. Eventually the conversation would turn to her husband Buddy, and every time Irene mentioned Buddy, she began to cry. "What do you miss most about him," I asked one afternoon, realizing that she really didn't have anyone much who would listen. "I just miss him," she said, "Everything about him. The chit chat. The fact he would listen to me. Now there is a mysterious silence in the house that bothers me. I am all alone." I asked about church and realized that church had been a regular part of her life for eighty years. Now suddenly, when she needed church most, she couldn't get there. Outside of the funeral, no one had come to visit or inquire about her. "I like coffee hour the most," she said, "the message is good (no offense to you or other preachers), but for me, it's the people. I miss other people."

As we drove away from her house on the last day, Charlotte Hawks, my faithful co-pilot asked me, "If Irene were a member of our church, would we have forgotten her?" The question haunts me still. My prayer is that no one in our church is excluded from the community and family of faith because they cannot get here. So many of our members have been so loyal to this church all their lives, we need to be loyal to them in their time of need. What then shall we say in response to Charlotte's question? I pray that our new building is a spiritual haven for all to enter in, and I pray that all who are not able to enter these doors on their own for reasons of health, or fear, or lack of faith will be welcomed and remembered by each one of us. It is always a great joy to see our deacons bringing in members of our congregation who can no longer drive. May we all strive to remember those people like Irene who have disappeared from our midst.

Two weeks later, I left Rutland, Vermont and we traveled with the senior highs to Roatán, Honduras. Roatán is an island thirty miles long and three miles wide just off the eastern coast of Honduras in Central America. On Saturdays, you can fly directly

to this island from Houston, TX. Thirty eight senior high youth and seven brave adult chaperones, walked off the plane onto this beautiful tropical island near Belize. It was so hot and humid that it felt like we were wading through molasses to get to the terminal where we went through customs and collected our bags. Roatán island is a study in contrasts. The worst poverty imaginable is right next to scuba diving resorts that serve the world's second most beautiful barrier reef, second of course to Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Unlike mission trips to Appalachia or inner cities, in Roatán we had the opportunity to take a dip in the ocean most days, and the water was crystal clear like a swimming pool. I would ask, "¿Alguien quiere ir á la playa para nadar?" which means "Does anyone want to go to the beach and swim?" And off we would go.

Twenty-three children live at the Majken Broby Children's home, twenty three precious angels (niños preciósos) who immediately stole our hearts. The youngest ones are Abner and Helen. They are five and six. When our Team Leader and founder named David Goode and his team first arrived five years ago, they spent the first summer putting bars on the windows to protect the girls. It is almost too awful to say, but sometimes when their caregivers would go out at night, strange men would break in and abuse these young girls. Five years and fifty mission trip later, there is still much work to be done there. The children eat arroz y frijoles cada día (rice and beans every day). When we first arrived the children jumped into our arms, looking for love and affection. (¿Quiéres jugar conmigo? Díme tu nombre. Do you want to play with me? Tell me your name.) As we walked around and picked our jobs for the week, it was obvious that their living quarters needed drastic help. The walls were covered in grafitti, and the rooms had almost no light. Three out of four of the toilets didn't work. "Están rotos," they explained. "They are broken." We gathered together and asked, "who knows how to install toilets and fix light sockets?" Don Pascal said, "Kibbie the ad you wrote said, "male over 25 needed, not licensed plumber or electrician!" It dawned on me that the two Indian chiefs I had with me that day, Sandy Brumley and

Don Pascal might have preferred doing a leverage buyout on the company that made the toilets rather than install them, so they opted to do demolition on the orphanage trade school all week (a job they surprisingly embraced while listening to classic Rock and Roll music), and David Zadik would do toilets after he installed a roof on a church. I guess that dentistry and plumbing have some things in common after all. Who knew?

The women on our team also had a dream to improve the children's bedrooms and bathrooms. Kim Marie Evans, Pam Van Hoesen, and Carolyn Cleveland had a vision of making these kids' living quarters—livable. I don't want to say that Martha Stewart came to Roatán Island, but Martha Stewart came to Roatán Island. With every hour of sweat, with every hug, with every conversation, we told these kids, "We love you. You are loved." One little boy said, "God loves you, why doesn't God love me?" And my heart broke, and his words haunt me still. **What can you say to a child in an orphanage in a third world country who asks you why God loves you more than God loves him?** Are there any words to answer? What I said was: "Vamos á regresar para ayudarlos. Lo prometo." We are going to come back and help you, I promise.

On our third afternoon in Honduras, I over heard some of our boys talking about how this island was poor, but it wasn't that poor, so the adults made a decision to take our youth for a walk through some of the poorest neighborhoods and hand things out to people who approached us in the street. They call this street ministry, and it is not for the faint of heart. We set out from the church where we were staying, and walked a block away into a world that could have been straight out of a Unicef commercial. Children up to age four ran around completely naked. There was raw sewage running under foot, and none of the children wore shoes. Everyone lived in one room huts made of random boards and tarps. The smells were indescribable, except I will tell you it was an unusual mixture of urine, burning brush, and marijuana. We went in search of three infants girls who had been abandoned by their parents. In each case, the parent asked their next door neighbor to watch their

newborn child, and never came back. We took them baby clothes, blankets, socks, baby formula, and handed out candy to the street children who followed us everywhere. David Zadik handed out 100 toothbrushes and toothpaste and tried to hold a seminar on flossing techniques but we told him he had to keep moving. At one point, I stepped over a handgun in the mud that was broken.

We walked down to a place called the Rock. And there we met Catalina, or should I say, Catalina met us. Catalina stopped me and asked me to pray for her. I took her hands and asked her what she wanted prayers about. She told me that she had hurt her hip so she couldn't do wash and cook, her sons were involved in drugs, and that everyone was just struggling to survive. But what she really needed was hope. (Dáme esperanza.) She was losing hope. I have never been asked to pray like this, and so I put down my head and closed my eyes and asked God to speak through me. I prayed for her hip, and for her children, and for that place called the Rock, that God's presence might be known to them so that they will have hope to face what life brings. I prayed for a long time, and then I hugged her, and we moved on. On the way home, one of the kids said, "I hope this day haunts me when I am on the Avenue going to buy new clothes for school." **What can we say about memories of others suffering which haunt us?** Thank you, God, for reminding us that others are losing hope, around the world and around the corner. May the light in this steeple never go out, and may all who see it know that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.

As we gathered the youth back together that night in Roatán, Honduras, we talked about what we called "the drop off" into the abyss of poverty. I sat with a young man who will forever hold a place of fondness in my heart. Andy Fisher told me about his life. He said, "Kibbie, I have every advantage. My parents can send me to college, any college I can get into. These kids have no chance. They will never leave this island, much less go to college." As we sat wondering if God is fair, Andy said something I don't think I will ever forget: "I cannot control the family I was born into,

but I can control how I live my life." And right there, in his life and in the lives of all of our kids, I saw Jesus Christ at work. **What then are we to say when things don't seem fair for others?** It is my prayer that all of us we hear the wisdom of Andy Fisher. We cannot control everything, but we can control how we live our lives.

I want to leave you with one last story. It didn't happen on a mission trip, but right here in our own church. Sara Ganshaw, a first grader last year and just 6 years old, came up to me one Sunday in the few seconds after the children's sermon before the kids run off to class. Her long beautiful hair was gone. She has cut it so short that it was shaved up the back. She told me that she had given it away to a program called Locks of Love so that another little girl with cancer might have a wig and be able to wear hair while she is undergoing chemotherapy. As she looked at me, she began to cry realizing perhaps how long it would take for the twelve inches of hair to grow back. And then she chased away the tears and said, "even though I will never meet her, I hope that she would do the same for me."

Friends, we have a tremendous opportunity in front of us, if we will just reach out and embrace it. The work *on* this building will soon be finished, but the work *in* this building and far beyond these church walls has just begun. May the doors of this church truly be the gateway to Thine eternal kingdom, O God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.