

"Building for the Future"

Colossians 2:6-10; Matthew 7:24-27

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 16, 2016 – 22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Humans aren't the only animals that build. Birds make intricate nests and beavers fashion sturdy dams. Bees construct elaborate hives, while ants tunnel out entire underground cities.

What makes people distinctive from other animals and insects is the extent to which we go beyond basic need. We do more than to construct for shelter; we express something about our personalities and aspirations through building.

Homes, for example, not only provide us with safety and security, but they also meet other needs as well. We want our house to be distinctive and set us apart from our neighbors. We want our living space to be a place of beauty, aesthetically pleasing to us and inviting to our guests.

In this sense humans are more than just construction workers; we are also the architects of our buildings. We become inspired and then translate our vision to paper. We choose our materials carefully and put them together in exacting and innovative ways. Color, too, is important to our plans and adds variety.

Churches are some of our finest examples of human initiative. If you've been to Europe you can't forget the magnificent cathedrals that have been part of community life for centuries. They are architectural masterpieces of beauty and grandeur, majestic places that dominate their cities. Their names are well-known: Notre Dame in Paris, the Kolner Dom [*dome*] in Cologne, St. Paul's in London, St. Peter's at the Vatican.

Cathedrals were not only places to worship, but thought of as an offering given back to the Lord. They were a gift of beauty and devotion, from both rich and poor alike, to our Creator God.

During their construction tons of stones were lugged over poor roads and put into place | one at a time. Dozens of craftsmen were employed to create the intricate carvings which adorn the interiors. Rich tapestries and wall hangings were woven to decorate the sanctuaries. Stained glass was fashioned to tell the faith story in pictures especially important for those who could not read. The end result was that these magnificent structures were special places where people could find a heightened awareness of God.

Truly great churches, however, are those which not only connect with people on the visual level, but are also centers of active ministry on a daily basis. Space is ultimately made sacred more by how it's used than what it looks like; still, the sights and sounds and feel of our surroundings are important. That's true for the first century or the twenty-first.

Now our building may be a bit more modest. Even by Presbyterian standards it is more functional than ornate. No flying buttresses here. No marble altar. No gilded carvings of any kind. No fine silver or gold in our liturgical ware.

Yet, there is something about it that sets it apart from Walgreens, Wal-Mart, or the branch library. We are affected either positively or negatively by where we live and work, and it's the same for where we hold our services. This room has been set aside primarily for worship, to gather together *with* God.

We care about this building, and for this building, because it is more than just four walls and a roof. Truly this is sacred space. It's practical and adaptable and comfortable, almost like a living room. We're thankful to all whose vision and hard work made it possible. We think about this especially on a day such as today.

Now in today's Gospel reading Jesus tells us how important it is that a building be constructed on a sound foundation, lest it fall apart when tested by the forces at hand. The base is the most important part of any structure, Christ says; without something solid underneath, all the rest is doomed to fail in the long run. Jesus' obvious interest, however, is not with construction but with the lives of people. The principle is the same for both.

We are further cautioned by Jesus that following him comes with a price. Like the farmer who wanted to build a watchtower and the king who intended to wage war, we are advised to consider the cost to us in advance to see if we have the wherewithal to carry us through. Being a disciple of his requires preparation and involves a cost.

The words from Paul this morning make it clear that following Jesus doesn't come without work and sacrifice. He says, "As you have received Christ... continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...." So then if you've got a right orientation on life, if you've put down a strong foundation of faith as a base, if you've counted the cost of being a follower, then it's time to build. And lives, like structures, are strongest and best when they are intentionally planned.

A person does not become a painter or a pianist or a physicist without extensive knowledge of subject matter and disciplined practice. No one would expect a medical student to have all the skills of a physician the first day she enters school. Nor would you expect this of a lawyer or a mechanic or an accountant.

Why then would it be different when it comes to matters of faith? Sometimes people have the idea that the Christian life is fully formed upon joining a church. Not true! Membership is not the end point at all, but more commonly it is the place of initiation.

Like the carpenter we must choose our materials carefully to build our personal house of faith. This is a structure that really takes a lifetime of construction. And each day we are given the opportunity to add a little more substance to it.

We build a life of faith through worship, education, experience, reflection, and application. We read the Bible and listen for God's particular word for us within the text. We use study aids, attend classes, and search out background information so that we can better understand the sacred writings. We listen to sermons so that we might gain insight as to how the scriptures apply practically to daily life.

We also act on what we believe, realizing that Christians must move as well as sit. We strive to carry out in our personal lives what God would intend for all of life. We resolve to do for

others as we would want them to do for us. We put aside our natural self-centeredness to give time and energy and resources to help others.

Finally, then, we take time to reflect and to grow from our first-hand experience. Study and action, held together by prayer, is the way we move forward and mature in our faith.

Little by little we add to the building of our spiritual life. Our inner space enlarges and becomes more sensitive, more attuned, more fulfilled. A truly developed life not only brings us a sense of purpose and completion, but it is an offering back to God as well. As Paul said, "Do your best to present yourself as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed...."

When I was a youngster I observed how some people in my hometown lived out the dream of a house of their own. First they built a basement and lived there for a while; then, when they had the money, they erected the rest of the house and moved upstairs. Probably no one would do that today, but it made sense economically then. I rather think these folks appreciated their step-up homes in a way that the more affluent never could.

As each of us is different, so is the structure we build on our foundation of faith. We have to count the cost. We have to determine how motivated we are and what commitments we are willing to make. We have to apply ourselves to study, reflection, prayer, and service.

It takes a lifetime to build our personal house of faith. It isn't quick. But with each room we add, each level we build, each space we beautify, we come a little closer to fulfilling our task. With each addition we finish, we find ourselves coming closer to God.

"Under construction" is a sign we see frequently, on everything from bridges to buildings. "Under Construction" is appropriately applied to us as well. It's a realistic description of where we are today. But even more so, it can be a positive statement about where we hope to be tomorrow.

If we make Jesus our personal cornerstone, then we're assured that our underlying foundation will be strong and our lives will be able to withstand the many tests of time. We may be shaken, but will not crumble when the storms of life surround us.

On this anniversary Sunday let's also remember that if Jesus remains the cornerstone of our congregation, we will continue to build on a foundation that will not let us down. We will be prepared for the challenges ahead but, better yet, we'll be able to take advantage of opportunities as they are presented.

To be the Church is more than putting up a street sign. It is living every day as a witness to Christ's power and presence. May God bless Highlands Church, now and in the years ahead, that we might build for the future and grow into our full potential.