

Pentecost C
Peace, Seattle
July 31, 2016
Luke 12:13-21

BUILDING SOMETHING THAT ENDURES

Perspective is everything; and our lessons offer very different perspectives this morning.

Looking back at his life, all the Teacher of Ecclesiastes can think about is what a waste it all is. All the blood, sweat, and tears and, and when your time is up, all you worked for ends up in the hands of some bozo who hasn't got a clue! Is this all that there is?! Pretty cynical outlook, it seems to me.

Psalm 49 offers a variation on the theme: what folly it is to think you can take it with you. And when we get to the gospel, we get a parable on the same topic, this time from Jesus' perspective.

The wealthy farmer thinks the abundant harvest is for him alone. But he is mistaken.

He has no trouble imagining how he could build bigger barns to store his windfall, but he has no imagination for seeing how that abundant harvest might be God's way of helping his neighbors.

What if, Jesus seems to say, what if we were to imagine the harvests that come our way not as windfalls meant for us alone but as God's way of providing for others?

On the last leg of our family road trip to California earlier this month, we came up the Redwood Coast and stopped in the Arcata area to see the two homes I once lived in and the two elementary schools my older kids had attended when I began ministry 30 years ago.

The schools looked great—they'd been well cared for and even upgraded and expanded.

My former homes—not so much. At the first, I noticed that the large Ponderosa pine, which had held the first treehouse I'd built, had been taken down. OK, no big deal—we'd rented that house anyway; not owned it.

But the second home—the one we'd bought and took great pride in painting and landscaping—treating it with all the TLC we could muster—was a complete disaster.

- The roof was coming a part
- The front yard was so overgrown with blackberry vines you couldn't even see the fence.
- And the back yard had become a junkyard, with abandoned vehicles and weeds waist high.
- The whole property seemed completely neglected—in fact, it seemed as if in the 25 years since my departure, not one thing had been done to care for that property.
- I was so sad I could hardly look. All that we'd given ourselves to—for naught.

Standing there on Dows Prairie Road, it was easy to imagine the bitter words of the Teacher from Ecclesiastes on my tongue. WHAT A WASTE!

I had a similar reaction when we stopped to see the Church of the Mountains on the Hoopa Reservation. I'd served as an interim pastor at Church of the Mountains 25 year ago, and had had rich experiences there.

Two large redwood trees flanked the sidewalk leading to the front doors of the building, and the manse, just north of the church, was surrounded by trees. The white clapboard church had been built in the

19th Century, and the church had once had a distinguished role in the community. Anthony Risling, one of the most revered Hupa elders, was a member of my church board.

That's how I remember it. But that's not what greeted us when we stopped by.

The two great Redwoods I remembered so well had been cut down. The manse, I learned, had burned in a fire some years ago. The old church building, which hadn't seen paint in who knows how many years, was chained and paddle locked shut. The whole property seemed forlorn and abandoned.

WHAT HAPPENED? It was downright depressing.

Fortunately, that wasn't our only stop. Heading north upriver along the Klamath we came to Orleans in order to reconnect with Jeanerette, a Karuk elder I'd met my first day on the job.

Jeanerette welcomed us into her home for two nights, and took us to some of the truly special and places sacred to the Karuk people from time immemorial. We swam in the Salmon River and sat on a bench overlooking Ishi Pishi Falls at Katamin—the Center of the World.

The evening of that second day, Jeanerette took us to meet her friend and neighbor Norman, a farmer and vineyard owner who over the past 50 years has made something beautiful out of the land there.

After an impromptu tour of his vineyard operation, Norm invited us over to his home, where, in a large cooler in his garage, he'd set aside fresh produce, knowing we were coming.

Two boxes of sweet corn, picked that morning.
Two boxes of tomatoes, fresh off the vine.
A box of ripe figs and ready to eat peaches. Umm.

Norman, I found out, often supplied not only Jeanerette and her extended family with fresh produce out of the abundance of his harvest. And he also contributed food for larger community gatherings when the sacred Dances were being held.

This wealthy farmer (by the way, I learned he has Lutheran roots!) had learned to operate quite differently from the rich farmer of Jesus' parable.

He may not have articulated it in just this way, but it was clear to me that Norman had come to understand that the abundant harvests the land had given him were not meant for him alone but were God's way of providing for others.

It's the same lesson that's behind the Tiny House we're building right outside.

The impetus to build a Tiny House, you'll recall, came from our five confirmands earlier this spring. They choose it as a project for embodying what servanthood and love of neighbor could look like. (Thanks girls...)

And it's been so fun to see the excitement about this Tiny House. The materials were delivered Thursday and the building began Friday afternoon. Everyone who shows up—and there have been many—seems to want to put hammer to nail and experience the satisfaction of driving it home.

Bent nails and re-starts are part of the process, but so far nobody's lost any fingers, and not a few who've put in time over the last two days have seen their skills start to improve.

When we got the four walls up yesterday, the young ones loved being side, and once it started resembling a house, it was nearly impossible to keep Luna out of it!

When little Elizabeth Ko, age 2, came by with her dad early in the evening, she could hardly contain herself, she climbed through the door and marched around inside like a queen taking possession of her new palace.

An 8 foot by 12 foot house. Some of us have bigger closets than that!

Building the Tiny House is an invitation to imagine what it might mean to pare down to the smallest configuration. It invites us to ask, what is essential? What do we really need? A sturdy floor, four walls and a roof...weather on the outside, safe and dry on the inside.

8 feet by 12 feet...for someone living in a car or a tent, that Tiny House may indeed resemble a palace.

In his letter to the Colossians this week, Paul talks about earthly things and heavenly things. "Seek the things that are above, where Christ is," he writes. But it's hard to seek the things that are above when you're fighting to keep a roof over your head.

So, here's a question:

This Tiny House we're building—is that an earthly thing or a heavenly thing?

The answer, of course, is YES. It's both.

It's something that's bringing heaven and earth together.

Beneath the enthusiasm for putting hammer to nail, for the smell of freshly cut wood, and the joy that comes with working together as a team, is the deep satisfaction of knowing that we are—quite literally—doing God's work with our hands, building something substantial and real that will make a profound difference in someone's life; and has already made a difference in our own.

And what else can we say to that but, Thanks be to God!

Amen.