

“If You Build It...”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Acts 4:23-37
John 20:19-31

Joseph was one of the followers who had sold a piece of property and brought the money to the apostles.

He was a Levite from Cyprus, and the apostles called him Barnabas, which means “one who encourages others.”

Acts 4:23-37

Let us pray... O God,
Strengthen our faith for what you have given us to do and be,
here, in this time and place.

Help us to encourage one another in the good work of building up your Kingdom –
a Beloved Community that is possible, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Amen

There is a line of dialogue in the 1989 movie, “Field of Dreams”
that has entered our cultural discourse as a symbol of faith and optimism...
In the middle of an Iowa cornfield, a mysterious voice whispers to a farmer,
If you build it, he will come.

The crisis for the farmer is that he is about to lose his farm to foreclosure,
so the strange message of *If you build it, he will come*
is both daunting and inspiring.

He soon learns that the ‘it’ that is to be built... is a baseball field –
kind of like Noah being told to build the Ark in the middle of a desert.
The ‘he’ who is referred to, represents several characters in this story –
a scandalized baseball team, a doctor, a reclusive writer, and someone else.
kind of like expecting the return of Christ... these days.

However, this quote has been transformed through popular use to become:
“If you build it, *they* will come.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HnEiMG1Rko>

“They” actually do – about 65,000 people a year visit the farm
where this movie was filmed in Dyersville, IA;
and they come to run the bases and play catch,
with the backdrop of endless fields of corn.
Coming to the farm where “Field of Dreams” was filmed
serves as a kind of pilgrimage for the people who visit there.

The story is a fantasy that celebrates visualizing a goal and bringing it to fruition –
but it also represents a longing for a simpler time.
In this story, the love of baseball as an American institution provides the context
for this longing for that Golden Age...

Willard, p.2

Every generation looks back to a Golden Age when things were better –
and may actually have been, though I think it depends for some people
as to what time and what place.

For many of us these days, the 1950s-era was a nostalgic time
of expansion and creativity and optimism – Elvis, rock ‘n’ roll, ‘57 Chevys,
soda shops, bobbysoxers, skyscrapers, drive-in theaters,
Santa Claus’ visits to department stores, Easter parades,
fireworks on the 4th of July, church picnics and baseball games...

“Field of Dreams” drew upon an even earlier time – the 1920s,
to combine the iconic imagery of baseball as ‘America’s favorite pastime’
and the family farm of ‘Middle America’ as metaphors
for that quintessential time of American innocence and confidence.

Jesus used farming metaphors, too, when envisioning God’s Kingdom of Heaven
through parables, like... a sower who threw seeds upon all kinds of ground,
or like a tiny mustard seed planted to become a great tree, or like...

“A farmer who cast seed upon the earth;
And while that farmer slept through the night and awakened to the day,
that seed had sprouted and was already growing –
though the farmer knew not how.
The earth itself brought forth the plant:
First the shoot, then the grain, then the ripened head of wheat;
And when the crop was ready,
right then, the farmer passed through the field to bring in the harvest...”

Jesus’ parables describe a ‘Kingdom’ that is possible
as a dream that can yet be realized, if we give it a chance and work for it –
If you build it, they will come...

In many ways, the American Dream has been a realization of that hope
for how a representative society and technical ingenuity can work together
for the common good and advancement of all humanity.

However in the 21st Century, that dream seems more elusive for us and the world.
Like I said, the 1950s for many of us are the Good Ol’ Days.

But the 1950s and earlier, were not so good for everyone
as age-old injustices in the American South were being challenged
through the emergence of the Civil Rights movement –
and were being challenged right back...

Last week, April 4th 50 years ago, commemorated the death
of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He was murdered the day before he was to participate in the Poor People’s March
in support of Memphis sanitation workers.

Willard, p.3

The night before he died, he gave a speech at a church in Memphis
in which he said, [God had allowed him] *to go up to the mountain*
[and King went on to say,]

... I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land.

*I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight,
that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

Dr. King often spoke of the Beloved Community as the goal –
an achievable social reality of justice and peace for all people.

I have no doubt that this is the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed in his parables,
which the Apostle Paul called the Body of Christ,
and even what our American Dream aspires to be.

The Church – the historic community of faith as followers of Jesus Christ,
with all her denominations, aspires to be that Beloved Community, as well.

We are part of that endeavor to be the people of God in our time and this place.

It was not so long ago that two ministers had a vision and asked a question
which they posted in the newspaper back in 2003:

Is there interest to meet and discuss the possibility
for as a congregation of the United Church of Christ
to be gathered in The Villages-area?

About 30 people answered that call and in time formed a group
that became charter members and called the first pastor,
the Rev. Dr. Bill Wealand, who – by the way,
continues to serve the Florida Conference, most recently
as Disaster Response Coordinator.

There was a resolve to build a church and seven years later,
we walked down the street from Temple Shalom –
our community's synagogue that nurtured our church for 3 years.

By that time, I was called to lead this church and we have grown
'as a small church with a big heart' as Betty McLeod once said.

If you build it, they will come – and here you are!

Just a week or so ago, our Governing Board gathered for a leadership retreat
to discuss our mission and set forth a vision statement.

That will be presented to you in due time in accordance with our tradition
for review and approval as words for this congregation

to know and live by – our narrative,
in concert with other communities of goodwill,
and in opposition to the false narratives of fear and doubt.

Willard, p.4

Know that you have conscientious and experienced leaders
who are approachable and open to 'being the Church' in this time and place.
Now there will always be need for a 'complaints department',
but concerns turn into joyful 'prayer requests' as a congregation learns
to dance the dance of faith together – and play ball together!

James Earl Jones as the reclusive writer, Terence Mann
encourages the farmer not to give up on his dream –
even in the face of foreclosure, when he says:

Ray, people will come Ray.

They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom.

They'll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they're doing it.

They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past.

Of course, we won't mind if you look around, you'll say.

It's only \$20 per person.

They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it:

for it is money they have and peace they lack.

And they'll walk out to the bleachers;

sit in shirtsleeves on a perfect afternoon.

*They'll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the baselines,
where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes.*

And they'll watch the game

and it'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters.

The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces.

People will come Ray.

The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball.

America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers.

It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again.

But baseball has marked the time.

This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray.

It reminds of us of all that once was good and it could be again.

Oh... people will come Ray. People will most definitely come.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097351/quotes>

Friends, substitute 'baseball' for 'church' and you will discover that we are
playing in the progressive league that not only seeks to
... [remind] us of all that once was good and... could be again,
but calls us out into a future hope as we participate in the building up
of the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom, the Body of Christ, while
believing that if we build it, they will keep coming – until that day
when *he* finally shows up at home plate...

Amen

Our lesson today from Acts 4:23-37 as found in the Contemporary English Version, describes how the early Christian church survived as a movement despite being persecuted by the authorities...

- ²³ As soon as Peter and John had been set free,
they went back and told the others everything that
the chief priests and the leaders had said to them.
- ²⁴ When the rest of the Lord's followers heard this, they prayed together and said:
Master, you created heaven and earth, the sea,
and everything in them.
- ²⁵ And by the Holy Spirit you spoke to our ancestor David.
He was your servant, and you told him to say:
"Why are all the Gentiles so furious?
Why do people make foolish plans?"
- ²⁶ The kings of earth prepare for war,
and the rulers join together against the Lord and his Messiah."
- ²⁷ Here in Jerusalem, Herod and Pontius Pilate got together
with the Gentiles and the people of Israel.
Then they turned against your holy Servant
Jesus, your chosen Messiah.
- ²⁸ They did what you in your power and wisdom
had already decided would happen.
- ²⁹ Lord, listen to their threats!
We are your servants.
So make us brave enough to speak your message.
- ³⁰ Show your mighty power,
as we heal people and work miracles and wonders
in the name of your holy Servant Jesus.
- ³¹ After they had prayed, the meeting place shook.
They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and bravely spoke God's message.
- ³² The group of followers all felt the same way about everything.
None of them claimed that their possessions were their own,
and they shared everything they had with each other.
- ³³ In a powerful way the apostles told everyone that the Lord Jesus was now alive.
God greatly blessed his followers,
³⁴ and no one went in need of anything.
Everyone who owned land or houses would sell them
and bring the money ³⁵ to the apostles.
Then they would give the money to anyone who needed it.
- ³⁶⁻³⁷ Joseph was one of the followers who had sold a piece of property
and brought the money to the apostles.
He was a Levite from Cyprus, and the apostles called him Barnabas,
which means "one who encourages others."

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,
the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the [Judeans],
Jesus came and stood among them and said to them,
“Peace be with you.”

²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again,
“Peace be with you. As the [Abba] Father has sent me, even so I send you.”

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them,
“Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them
when Jesus came.

²⁵ So the other disciples told him,
“We have seen the Lord.”

But he said to them,
“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails,
and place my finger in the mark of the nails,
and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later,
his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.
The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said,
“Peace be with you.”

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas,
“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,
and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.”

²⁸ Thomas answered him,
“My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Jesus said to him,
“Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,
which are not written in this book;

³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.