

Building a Tower

Luke 14:28-30

June 19, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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In May, we all learned that this church has a budget deficit that we must close in order to remain sustainable well into the future. Last week I talked about Jesus' Parable of the Talents and the need to approach this problem from a position of spiritual abundance rather than fear, and I named many of the great gifts that God has given us to help us as we make decisions about our budget. Today, I want to look at this issue, still theologically, but from the other side, and hence, today's scripture about building a tower. Faithful generations of saints in this community have gifted us with a beautiful property overlooking the lake, a classic New England church house, and a legacy of ministry in worship and service that is known throughout our community. What is our responsibility as the Body of Christ in Center Harbor, New Hampshire, to be good stewards of this gift for future generations of believers here?

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Last year, Dave I and replaced the big deck on the front of our house. It is huge – over 500 square feet, and it was starting to deteriorate. Worse, the previous owners had painted it instead of using stain, so that enormous deck had to be repainted every other year. It was a mammoth task, and not one I could tackle at all. It seemed Dave spent almost all his time either painting the deck or dreading painting the deck. So, we decided to start fresh and get a new deck. And we opted for Trex decking, rather than wood, so there would be no painting or staining ever again.

It was so much fun to imagine our new deck. We looked at all the brochures and studied the online pictures and decided just what we wanted. We knew it would be expensive, because it is so large, and it's Trex. But when we heard the actual price, we both said, "Yikes!" And we quickly opted for the standard planks, instead of the ones that had to be special ordered at a higher price. The fancy railing went away, too, in favor of a regular rail. The price was still breathtaking, but it was possible within our budget. Our deck was finished just a year ago. I hope all of you come see it some time. It has light gray planks, white rails, and black spindles. We're pretty proud of it, actually, and we don't miss the features we chose to leave out. Also, I'm really glad to be finished paying for it and not have debt hanging over our heads.

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Today's scripture is about building, not a deck but a tower. It is from a passage about the cost of discipleship. In several short statements, Jesus says that we have to be serious about the choice to follow him, and we have to realize that it will cost us something. Maybe it will cost us a lot. This particular portion of that passage is all about being clear-eyed. Count the cost before you begin. Make a realistic plan. Don't expect there magically to be a solution that won't cost you anything. That was an appropriate message about being a Christian in a time of persecution, as Jesus' earliest followers were. But it is also a message about what God expects of us today as we decide how to be good stewards of this wonderful church. Plan ahead, Jesus says. Know the cost. Build the tower you can afford to build. Don't lay a huge foundation and then not be able to finish the job.

I want you to know that we are not the only church facing a budget deficit this year. I would guess that almost every small or medium-size church in America is in a similar situation to us, and some of the larger churches, too. And – another guess – many of these other churches have far bigger holes to fill, and fewer resources at their disposal than we have. Many of them are in a downward financial spiral that will be almost impossible to pull out of. That is not our situation, and we don't want it to become our situation. We have a lot of degrees of freedom here that many, many other churches do not have, so long as we don't kick the can down the road.

But here's the thing about churches. They do kick the can down the road. Often, a way is found to fill a budget hole temporarily, like the bequest we received from Nancy Kelley this year. Money will fall out of the sky, just enough to keep the lights on and pay the heating bill. And in so many churches, everyone will give thanks to God, breathe a sigh of relief, and then not make the fundamental adjustments they need to make to keep the hole in their budget from getting bigger, year after year. "God has provided," they will say, "and God will provide again in the future." It is such a common thing in churches that I would bet it has happened in this church, too, in the past. When our backs are against the wall, we know that God does provide for us, but that does not absolve us of the responsibility to do everything in our power to build wisely for the future. Today's scripture urges us, "Count the real cost now. Build the tower you can afford to build." That is our task this year.

Now, I have to tell you that maybe four or five times a year, I purchase a Powerball ticket, just for the fun of imagining what I would do with all that money if I won. Do you do that? We would pay off our mortgage for sure, and purchase a townhouse in Richmond, where our grandchildren live, and set aside some money for our kids. And the very next thing on my list is to write a big fat check to this church. It's right there in my Lottery Winner Plan. This is my most recent ticket. Not a winner. In fact, every time so far that I have checked the winning numbers the next morning, one by one, across my ticket, there's no grand prize. Once I matched two numbers and won something like \$4. That's it. Those are my total winnings. So, as much as I would love to win the lottery, and as surely as I would love to write that big fat check to this church from the winnings, our church's plan for the future can't be, "And then Cathy will win the lottery." And it can't be, "And then someone else will die and leave us a pile of money." Today's scripture tells us that being faithful, trusting in God, does not allow us to use magical thinking. We have to count real costs and make prudent decisions.

Another form of magical thinking that churches very often use is thinking that we will grow very fast and all the new people will make pledges that will close our budget deficit. We do have to invest in the things that make this a lively and inviting place to worship and to serve God together, and you can see that we have been successful this year in attracting new members. But new members are not necessarily new givers. People who join may give regularly to the church for months or years before they feel ready to become members, so bringing in new members does not always mean bringing in new giving. And further, the people God calls to join us here may be people who have other gifts to contribute to our faith community, but not much money to contribute. Or growth may require us to add expenses in our budget in order to serve the new members well. So, we have to plan for the size church we already are and not count on great increases in giving to come from those whom God will bring to join us. If giving does increase in the future, we will have plenty of opportunity to do great things with those gifts, but that cannot be our solution. We cannot build our plan around either great bequests or winning lottery tickets falling from the sky, or around lots of smaller gifts coming to us from new members. Approaching our budget deficit as people of faith does not give us permission to use magical thinking about what will happen in the future. We have to build the tower that we can afford to build today.

There are only so many options to close a budget hole. Increase income. Cut expenses. Or some combination of the two. So, we are probably going to have to do some things we would rather not do. We are going to have to change how we give, or hold additional fundraisers, or cut expenses somewhere. Maybe our wonderful committee will find ways for us to tinker around the edges of what we already do. Perhaps they will propose big new adventures for us. I don't know. What I DO know is that this is still a business problem for us to solve, and being people of faith, the scripture tells us, does not absolve us from understanding that and acting on it. We must be clear-eyed in this task. We will build the tower we can afford. And in the end, we will learn to function well with the choices we have made. And we won't miss the things we give up, just as I learned that I really don't care about fancy deck railing for our new deck. We will flourish as a church, because we will still be the living, breathing Body of Christ in this community.

This church – this building, this beautiful property overlooking the lake, our ministries of worship and service, the music we make, the ways we are known in our community, all of it – is a precious gift from God. We already have this foundation. It is solid. And together, we will be good planners, good builders, and faithful stewards of this gift.

Amen