

“WHAT WILL YOU BUILD?”

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A man walked the 15 miles sloping down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Thugs descended on him, stripping, beating and robbing him, splaying him out in a ditch. It so happened a priest walked by next. He just kept walking. Likewise, a temple official saw that bloody mess along the roadside. He decided not to get involved. Then a Samaritan walked by. What's a Samaritan? Think a New Canaan hockey player if you are a Darien hockey player, or a Muslim if you are Donald Trump. This *undesirable* sees the heap of misfortune on the roadside and wonders if he is still alive. When he is alive, he does everything he can and more to assist him.

That's what it means to love your neighbor, Jesus says. Half of the battle is just seeing him or her--truly noticing a neighbor--even before we get to the love part. For me the parable turns on that moment as the Samaritan is just going about his business but then draws near to the victim. And he saw him. And he felt for him. Let's pause there. Do you stop for every car you see stranded on I-95? Do you pause over every person you see gently weeping in a shopping mall or on a park bench? Maybe I am not alone when I honestly say that I for one don't. But we do stop for some. What grips us in that moment to see some in their misfortune such that our hearts go out to them and respond in a whole-hearted, meaningful way?

It is a mystery, isn't it? We could call it a mystery of empathy in the human heart, or a mystery of God's Spirit winning us over to the cause of others. But why one and not another? It seems fickle that we gravitate toward some and not others. This holds not only for the stranded and broken along life's way, but also for the benevolent causes we champion. Some incline toward the Open Door Shelter, others Feed My Starving Children. Some Doctors without Borders, others Amnesty International. I suppose the crucial thing is we all start somewhere and find our niche--one personal and meaningful to us--where we reach out to the broken. Then we can pray that God will orchestrate our many niches—like a patchwork of a worldwide quilt--to cover life's hard landscape, to warm the cold and homeless.

Today I want to tell you how Habitat for Humanity captured my imagination like this. It begins with that piece of cardboard you saw me carry into church today. My mother's sister Marie and her husband Andy Rojas were missionaries to Latin America for 53 years. They spent their lives with dirt poor *campesinos* after the long days they spent working farm fields. As the work day ended, as these short dark people came in from the fields to fix their staple rice and beans for dinner, Marie got out her accordion and Andy his guitar to teach simple hymns. I know, it sounds homespun, maybe even homely. But on Sundays, they went from farm to farm leading worship. The two of them started innumerable churches like this.

So I grew up with the valiant faith of Andrew and Marie Rojas right in front of me. When I was in 2nd grade, two of our denominational missionaries were murdered

in the Congo. It made the cover of Life magazine. I realized missionary work was not for the faint-hearted. I saw the love of Jesus for the broken and forgotten in a new way. This was why I learned Spanish early on and have a heart for hard-working, intrepid, and generous Latin Americans who've always treated me well.

While God called me to lead churches in the USA, I have always felt that that my aunt and uncle gently handed me a torch of working within short-term missions. What if such dirt poor workers could really own a home? I asked myself. What if all that is part of God's dream for the world, what Jesus called the reign of God?

I loved the stories told about Marie and Andy. For me mission means romance, the romance of Jesus in love with a whole world, and with those unlike ourselves. Sometimes the beauty and the glory of that holy romance still makes me cry. In fact, it is the number one thing in life that cracks my heart open with happy tears.

Stories like the cardboard in the trunk of their little economy car. As family visited them on the Texas and Mexico border, they found the cardboard in their trunk at the airport. Uh, can we get this out of here? We need room for our suitcases in here. No, said Marie gently, but insistently. You may *not* remove that cardboard.

You see, when peasant women are pregnant, they still work the fields into their ninth month. In fact, they work until the day they deliver. They cannot afford not to. Often they would go into labor in the fields doing the back-breaking crop work. And that layer of cardboard was their only hospital as Marie delivered the babies.

I wanted to share this story with our young in our children's sermon. Doing my due diligence on fact-checking, I decided to Google Marie and Andrew Rojas. A 2008 story appeared from the American Bible Society. I learned a few things. Of course, they needed Bibles to stock all those new churches. The American Bible Society down in Manhattan estimates that my aunt and uncle distributed more than a million Bibles over their 53 years of service. Two people---a million Bibles.

They also taught literacy to help folks read the Bibles. They always distributed vitamins and used-clothing in their path. Wherever they ministered, infant mortality dropped. They launched a six year conversion campaign in the red-light district of Reynosa, Mexico called Operation Scarlett. I know that couldn't have been easy. By the end of their lives, they had nothing, living in a church retirement home. People likely perceived them as innocuous nobodies. But I believe at their death God welcomed them as royalty. Just consider all the two had built with their lives.

Paul says, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." For me, the homes built here with the poor connect me to God's mansions in the sky. It reminds me of my favorite Habitat for Humanity t-shirt. After 11 trips, building 79 homes—you built seven homes two years ago in the D.R.—this is my favorite.

What will you build? I love the stark beauty of it. How it cuts to the chase. How it leaps out at us. What will you build with your days? What kind of difference will you make with your resources? What graces will you pass along in your lifetime? What does it mean not to neglect chances to do good that present themselves and could easily be postponed until later, but then get forgotten and lost? It is easy to curse the darkness, especially in a dark moment of history. But what candles would you light to show the way to dispel and chase despair's darkness?

What will you build? A question like this is foundational, if you'll pardon the pun, to crafting a well-lived life. A life without regrets. A life, when you look back on it, leading you to say, "I'm so glad I made room in my schedule and budget for that!"

The parable of the Good Samaritan recalls fleeting moments in this lifetime when our simple kindness and generosity can become the stuff of legend for always. And the glow of those glorious acts never dims because they connect us to God. As God's light shines through our best efforts to humble people and places, it will show the way for others of us. It shows the way of God's reign of good over evil.

We've already received enough from three church families and the Outreach Cmte. to build four houses in Costa Rica. My goal is 100 homes before I retire. That is what I hope to build in my earthly days. What will you build? I invite you to find this envelope. For the \$6,000 of one home, you'll forever change the life of a family in transcendent ways. If you still don't get how this happens and what this feels like, view the 8 minute video in our Parish Hall on the family we housed in the DR, Elias and Adele and their two daughters. Every time I see it, I melt again.

Finally, Marie and Andy are now long gone. But that 2008 ABS article about them opened like this. "Each month, a determined 88-year old takes the bus to a nearby shopping mall, praying that the Lord will direct her to a Spanish speaker. Sometimes, the fluent Spanish pouring out of the mouth of this radiant *gringa* puzzles those she greets." Even pushing 90, she couldn't stop distributing Bibles.

When I interviewed as your pastor, I told the Search Committee don't call me here if you don't want me building homes. Because that means I'm not meant to be here. Once you get the feeling of building something that's both temporal and eternal, once it gets in your blood and changes you, you just can't stop. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, loved to call this "*infectious Habititis*."

I hope you catch it, wherever your passion for the least of God's earth leads you. I want to hear your stories of where you make a difference. What will you build? Amen.