

Two Houses, Unfinished
Luke 14:28-33
Colebrook Congregational Church
September 4, 2016 / 16th Sunday After Pentecost / Labor Day Sunday

There were a lot of Herods in Jesus' time. So much so, that the name almost took on the same meaning as the name “caesar” did to the Romans. Luckily, the New Testament only describes four of them. There is the Herod that sat in the trial of the Apostle Paul. His father, the Herod who persecuted the early Church in Jerusalem. Then his uncle, the Herod who played a part in trial of Jesus and the execution of John the Baptist. Then his father, Herod the Great, the first Herod, who was king when Jesus was born.

Herod the Great was appointed King of Judea by the Roman Senate, and he wanted to be remembered always, and sought lasting fame by undertaking many massive building projects. He built an entire Roman city. He built public buildings, aqueducts, roads, and palace-fortresses in and around Jerusalem, including the famous Masada. Yet, most of these have vanished to time.

He also started work on one of the largest construction projects of the first century: The Restoration of the Second Temple.

After the Persians ended the Babylonian Exile, they helped rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, but it had been damaged heavily by Alexander the Great and his successors, the Romans, and rebellions. So, Herod went to the priests on Mount Moriah with a plan to restore the Second Temple, and expand the complex to at least double the size, while allowing the rituals and sacrifices to continue uninterrupted.

He expanded the platform that we know now as the Temple Mount so much, it absorbed a neighboring hill, building many vaults to hold up this platform, which is also part of the basis of the legends about a hidden treasure under the Temple. During one of Jesus' visits to the Temple during Passover, it is reported that construction had already been going on for 46 years! In fact, when this Temple was destroyed by Romans, Herod's full plan wasn't realized. It was not fully completed.

Jesus grew up surrounded by incomplete building projects, especially the Temple. This probably is why Jesus used the imagery of building projects to illustrate his Parable of the Tower Builder. Jesus' parable is about the cost & responsibilities of discipleship, warning us against any light-hearted assumption of responsibilities of being a disciple. He is telling us that we must consider first the cost and what it will mean, and what is in our nature to bear. Jesus is challenging us to consider: What does it mean to be a disciple? To follow Jesus?

Religious Architecture is a favorite topic of mine. My Senior Honors Thesis studied the Congregational church architecture of Litchfield County; my work-study job in seminary was as the religious art & architecture slide librarian; and I hardly ever pass up an opportunity to visit a cathedral. I also love the quirky little stories that come from the construction of houses of worship.

If you find yourself in the center of Torrington, stand in front of my home church, Center Congregational, the gray church with blue blue doors. Then look across the street at St. Francis, and see if you notice anything...a little off. When they were building St. Francis, they looked across the street at Center Church and said that they could not let a Congregational church have a taller steeple than them, so they built that odd mound to raise the foundation, and their tower is disproportionately large compared to the rest of the building. All that to have a higher steeple than the church next door.

There is a similar story connected to the cathedral that I have visited most: The Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In 1887, the Episcopal church in New York City decided that they needed a cathedral to rival the Catholic Cathedral of Saint Patrick. Even though it is still not completed, it is the fourth largest Christian church in the world. Don't get me wrong, I find it an amazing and awe-inspiring house of worship, but the motivation behind it, like that of the steeple of St. Francis, does not seem to reflect proper Christian discipleship.

Cathedrals can require a massive amount of resources, and is not an endeavor to be taken upon lightly. Like the Builder in the Parable, you have to make sure that you have all the resources to complete the project before you start it, or you risk being mocked for not being able to complete the project.

Even with modern building materials and equipment, St. John the Divine is still not completed. And there hasn't been any significant construction since 1997. In fact, due to a fire, it's actually less complete now than it was the last time I was there! It has been nicknamed, "St. John the Unfinished."

There was also a period of almost 40 yrs in the mid-twentieth century where construction had halted. The Bishop had decided to call a halt to the construction because he felt that the resources would be put to better use by addressing more charitable needs in the City. Now that, in my opinion, is a better response to Jesus challenging us to consider what it means to be a disciple.

As Jonathan Edwards teaches us, motivation matters. Engaging in a huge project, like construction, to such an extent, with the motivation of gaining fame, like Herod's reconstruction of the Second Temple and all his other projects; or of being more grand than the other house of worship down the street like St. Francis and St. John the Divine; it corrupts the project. It misses the whole point of what Jesus has Called us to be as His Disciples. Being a Disciple is not making the prettiest thing in an attempt for self-glorification, but by responding to Jesus with love in our hearts and the most effective use of our God-given gifts that help others. That motivation is the best one to have when we go out and build our towers!

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Our Maker, inspire us to build towers with great foresight. Grant us the wisdom to consider our resources, finding them sufficient to complete our projects before we even begin them. And may our motivations be pure, pushing down any selfish pettiness that may try to impose itself, knowing that we serve Your glory, and not our own. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Creative God, through our work, You made us co-creators with You, shaping the world in which we live; and by our labor, You enrich the world, we enjoy the fruits of creation, and we find direction and purpose.

You bless us all with skills and gifts for labor. We give thanks that You provide us opportunities to use them, for the benefit of others as well as for ourselves.

We pray for your blessings and guidance in all the labors Your people engage in. For those who plow the field and those who make the plow; for farmers and farm workers, for steelworkers and machinists; for those who work with their hands and those who move the earth. For those who tend the sick and those who seek new cures; for doctors and nurses, for scientists and technicians; for those who keep notes and those who transcribe. For those who think and those who create; for inventors and explorers, for artists and musicians; for those who write books and those who entertain. For those who work in offices and those who work in warehouses; for secretaries and receptionists. For those who inspire our minds and those who motivate us; for teachers, for public servants; those who help the poor and those who work with our children. For those whose labor is tidiness and cleanliness; for janitors and sanitary workers, for cleaners and housekeepers; for those who produce cleaning products and those who use them. For those who sail the waves and fly the skies; for astronauts and deep sea divers; for those who chart and those who navigate.

We pray for all who need You. For those who feel lost or abandoned; for those in pain and those unwell; For the refugees here and abroad; for those affected by a violent world. We offer ourselves to be Your hands, bringing Your love to all.

We especially pray for:

Hear the prayers of our hearts, spoken and unspoken, that we may love You with our whole being and willingly share the concerns of our neighbors.

Amen

Luke 14:28-33

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Psalm 1

1:1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

1:2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

1:3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

1:4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

1:5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

1:6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.