

Let's Build A Church!

September 16, 1962

When someone – all bright-eyed and bouncy with enthusiasm – suggests “Let’s build a church!” – what should the reaction, the response be? Should it be, “O goody! goody, goody!”? No. For building a church is not a game – to escape the tedium of prosperity. There may be some sport in it – the thrill of venture – and a lot of fun. We will enjoy it – the excitement of plans, programs – building together with friends – the happy touch of shoulders to the wheel – pulling as one – “heave ho and away we go!” – that’s all a part of building anything, isn’t it? – a house, a business, a school, a church too – and that’s all just dandy – the game part – the sport of it – the fun.

Haven’t we enjoyed building our little church here? Lord, what a long way she’s come! And it surely has been fun! Do you remember how she used to look? And how we’ve happily spent the years patching and polishing and improving and expanding – and it’s all been done with friendly gamesmanship. Yeah, we’ve honestly enjoyed it – Good, clean joy. And you want to know something? We’ll go right on taking one of our life’s sweetest pleasures in building the church here – right here – for a church is never built – and their children after us – and their children’s children. Remember a church has 9 lives and more. It’s hard to kill a church, almost impossible. I can think of precious few churches that have up and died. A business is a perishable thing – but a church? You can shake it up, divide it – but a church will live on and on – for the sheer rugged blessed joy of it.

And just as we shall continue to thrill to our work here – so it will be a thrill to build – the new Presbyterian church – that will have its very first worship service next Sunday morning we hope – or the next at eleven o’clock in the auditorium of the Hope Valley School – and already we are busily planning two more – and there will be more and more – as we grow. And as the country newspaper say, “a good time was had by all.” To get out of our old ingrained, satisfied rut – to get out on the firing line the growing edge with the gospel of Jesus Christ is fun – by God!

Which brings us to our second point. Maybe we’ll have to modify what we said at the start – maybe there is some gamesmanship in building a church – this church, any church – there’s the deep, sweet pleasure of disciplined effort to make anything grow and go. So maybe when someone says “Let’s build a church!” there’s some justification for saying “O goody!” That’s not as silly as it first sounds. About the two happiest days of my life were the day I started a church under a sycamore tree and two dogs got into a fight during the opening prayer + it rained and we had to run for shelter – and the day we broke ground for that educational building next door and I knew we were on the way to

unscrambling the S.S. out of this basement, about as easy as unscrambling eggs, have you even tried, into real rooms. I can still feel, taste the joy of it ...

So why not call it fun? It was + it is – but – as we said – it is “fun by God.” For building a church is a social kind of fun – of joy. It goes beyond the elation of building a house, a business, even a school. So I think the true response to “Let’s build a church!” is not simply “O good, good!” It’s “O God, God.”

For building a church – is not only work – and I do mean work – a church is also a leap of pure faith – for a church is a divine reality. It’s not just a spell of camaraderie that gives most any little old church nine lives – and keep it living when you might think it ought to be long dead – it’s something else that animates a church – a mysterious something – something the shallow may scoff, make mock of – something the intellectual may smile indulgently but agnostically over – something even the believer may not be aware is there, so busy is he in the business of the ch. – yet there is something that makes the church more than an economic institution – it is that of course – there is something that makes the ch. more than a religious club – more than a happy group to discuss philosophy and social theory – more than a moral uplift society – beyond all this there is something unique in a church – that gives it its nature, it’s life – its mission.

No, that’s wrong, it’s not “something” at all – it’s nothing like gothic building plans, clever programs of education or ritual, or purposes like life-enrichment – or slogans like “a million income in each and 4 everyone a thriller.” It isn’t “something” that makes a church – it’s ... someone.

It’s holy God. Without him – the ch. would long since have been dead – we would have killed it – with programs –. So when you build a church, you don’t say, “It’s very good,” you say “It’s very God.” Indeed “It’s very God of very God,” for a church, the church,” says the N.T. is “the body of Jesus Christ.” Do you believe that? Do you believe that you yourself – you John - you Tom – you Mary – are one cell – that we all gathered here are one cell group in the strong + lively body of the Christ – Lord’s corpus – that this is our nature, that this sets our mission – God present and at work in us in the world ... do you believe that? It is a strange, conscious awareness – but native to the whole Christian faith.

You can’t build a church without it! Without Him. Oh you can build a cathedral, sure, or a club, or a civic or a culture improvement center, and call it a church – if you want to – you can call it First Trinity, or St. Sabastian in the Meadow - “St. Philip 66” – (Cleland) – “Holy Mackerel” – “ch. of St. John the Devine” – “Crooked Run Baptist church” – you can call it high church or low church – but it’s no church unless –

Unless what? Unless who? Unless God in Christ inspires it, animates it, is it transforming a heterogeneous collection of people – (some rich, some broke – some bright, some kinda dumb – some morally strong, some morally weak – some well, some sick) – you don't build a ch. equating just one type of platform but a heterogeneous collection of people, transformed, I say, by the presence of Christ – into true community – living as one family together under God – because they are committed – not just to meeting and taking up a collection every week (Bob Hope – airliner in storm – little old lady – “somebody do something religious:” – “so I took up a collection”) – not just committed to a code of middle class respectability – and not even just committed to one creed that they can recite in their sleep because Luther wrote it or Calvin wrote it or Wesley wrote it – but a community committed to Jesus Christ – and therefore stamped with his character – which is love – or concern –

When Christ is alive in the midst – that is when the people have a lively concern for his cause in their hearts – you haven't have to plead for members – they will come together because the faith draws them and what's more they'll work together – you won't have to beg them – they'll work because they want to – + you don't have to plead for money – you just present the need – the challenge + a wide awake Christian community. Responds – and they give – not to keep up with Old First Ch. – or because they're afraid of St Sabastian on Meadow – but because they are committed to – none other than Jesus Christ – that's the heart and soul of the matter.

So come on – let's build a ch. – in every quadrant of the city + let's build one here, a good one, a far better one. We've a long way to go + grow out of loyalty to our Lord – So – some of you I'll see back here next Sunday – and to some we say goodbye + God go with you – you will need him – the way we still do – Amen + Amen.