

# The Three Towers

*Luke 14:25-35*

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 5, 2010

**Luke 14:25-35**

**(The Message)**

*(Hymn # 437 Count well the cost)*

*During 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of the hymn, begin building a tower with the Roop blocks up front where all can see. After the hymn is over...*

Very few days go by in my house that these blocks stay in their holder all day. We received them as a gift shortly after we moved here, and ever since, they have pretty much been a constant feature on our living room floor. Shylah and Tristan love them. I would probably love them too, if it weren't for the fact that every time I try to build a tower, one of my little munchkins strikes. *Knock over the tower.*

There is a part of me that is driven absolutely nuts by the way my kids (indeed most kids under the age of 5) feel a compulsive need to knock over anything that remotely resembles a tower. Just when my tower starts to actually look like a tower – down it goes. At times I think the only thing that could possibly be more annoying is that guy who insists on sitting down at the card table just as you are beginning the top tier of your card house.

But when I'm making block towers with my kids, its not about the towers...its about the kids. And along with the annoyed part of me, there is also an equal or greater part of me that is amazed and even a bit envious at the way my kids play with block towers. They build towers for a single purpose and a single moment – the moment that they come crashing to the floor. Both the fun and the reward comes in the process – first the process of building and next in the process of knocking it down.

Somewhere along the line, I lost that. We all do – its part of growing up. And by and large it is a good thing. Because losing that is what enables us to move beyond instant gratification and become productive. It's what enables us to stick with a project and see it through to the end. It's what enables us to see the big picture; to build not just for today, but for tomorrow. It's what enables us to not only make it day to day, but also to accomplish great things over the course of our lifetimes, and sometimes even over several generations.

I was recently reading about the building of the *Sagrada Familia* Church in Barcelona, Spain. This massive and idiosyncratic cathedral is one of the top tourist attractions in modern day Spain. I've never been there myself, but from the pictures, its distinctive towers look like giant drip sand castles on a beach. And I understand that the closer you get, the more you'll be impressed by these spindle shaped masterpieces that dominate the masterwork of Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi.

What amazed me, however, was not so much the design of this cathedral, impressive as it is. Rather, I was drawn to the date that construction started – 1882. It was notable because this article was pointing out that after over 125 years of construction, the church was finally

scheduled to hold its first service of worship this month. With the interior of its main nave finally finished, a Catholic mass will at last be hosted beneath those soaring towers. And yet construction will continue for some time, and is not expected to be complete until at least 2026.

It is hard for me to imagine the vision, the foresight, and the dedication it has taken to bring such a landmark into existence. From the heart and mind of an architect born in 1852, to the back-breaking work of countless labors – many, if not most of whom won't have the satisfaction of seeing the full fruit of their labor; from the plans on paper, to the breaking of ground and the laying of the first stone; from its big and even gaudy profile, to its layers of intricate detail and symbolism – such an undertaking is nothing short of incredible.

And the costs involved are astronomical. Clearly, Antoni Gaudi had to count the cost before setting out to design and build such a magnificent cathedral. He needed a whole community to buy into his vision, to commit to the labor, the sacrifices, and the investment that it would take over many generations to stay the course over the long haul. He needed faith that what he began would not be derailed by stumbling blocks that were sure to come along the way – even major ones like the Spanish Civil War that broke out in 1936. He needed trust that there would be others to pick up and adapt his plans even after he was gone, staying true to his vision while at the same time owning it enough themselves to meet the realities of a changing world.

In this, I see a parallel to Jesus in today's scripture text. We are told that Jesus was being followed by large crowds. And I imagine him looking out at these people and wondering how many of them were truly with him. I imagine him considering his hopes and dreams for the coming Kingdom – his life's work – and wrestling with whether these people who were flocking to his side at that moment would really be able to continue that work after he was gone, would really be able to pay the price and make the sacrifices needed to see that vision through to reality. Would they be able to give themselves wholly to such an undertaking? To delay the gratification of seeing the work accomplished in their own lifetimes, while trusting future generations to not only continue what they started, but also to own it and adapt it enough to fit the realities of a changing world?

And while Jesus is issuing a challenge to everyone in this crowd to count the cost of following him, I imagine that he was at the same time counting the cost himself, wrestling with whether such a grand enterprise could indeed be accomplished, wondering whether it was worth the investment he was about to make with his own life.

Building for the future is inherently and always a faith filled act. And I imagine Jesus looking over that sea of faces as he was contemplating the work of building the Kingdom, and I imagine Jesus struggling with his faith. For he knew that those people who gathered around him were already at work building important things in their own life. He knew that they were trying to build strong families, striving to achieve success in their own life work, and seeking security for themselves and those they loved. That is what people do. Like three towers on the horizon of everyone's life, human beings cannot escape the yearning for the heights of relationships, success, and security. How could Jesus ever hope to convince these people to commit themselves to his vision of a divine Kingdom while these basic human needs and drives towered in their psyches?

And so he looks out at them and says (and this is my very free paraphrase), "I appreciate you all coming here and listening to what I have to say and all. But if you really want to be a part of

what I'm doing, you have to hate your family and even your own life. You've got to pick up a cross and follow me to the death. You've got to give it all up – all your possessions, every single thing you own – if you really want to be one of my disciples. Can you do that? Are you up to it? Think before you answer – don't take this lightly. You don't want to make a fool of yourself by starting something you can't finish. And I don't want you if you aren't going to help me finish what I am starting.”

Now a lot of ink has been spilled trying to make sense of these pretty harsh and direct words from Jesus. This isn't Jesus meek and mild, knocking on the door of your heart while gently petting the head of a sweet little white lamb. This is hard-to-swallow, offending even his friends Jesus. And while some might be tempted to ignore or gloss over them as an aberration from the overall character of Jesus, even contemporary scholars who are skeptical that much of the gospels originated with the historical Jesus generally conclude that these words almost certainly originated with Jesus himself. The basic reasoning being that if Jesus didn't actually say such things, the gospel writers and the early church wouldn't have had any trouble doing away with them, because they are certainly hard-to-swallow and even a bit embarrassing for the early Christian community.

But if we think about it, it is not atypical for those seeking the best from those they are leading, who desire only those with the utmost commitment to the task at hand, to push those under their charge to their limits and beyond. When new recruits show up to boot camp, is not one of the first tasks of a drill sergeant to break down the individual wills and commitments of the prospective soldiers in order to ultimately build them up into disciplined and effective members of the armed forces? Is it not one of the primary jobs of a professional sports coach to push their players to put the needs of the team ahead of their own desires for playing time or personal stats? Is not one of the goals of our educational system to put students through a series of ever more challenging tests, withholding the most advanced credentials for only those who are able to prepare and defend their scholarship among the best minds in their field?

I suspect that Jesus was issuing a test in this scripture. He needed to know who he could count on when the going got tough, who was going to be with him to the end, and ultimately who would be there to pick up the pieces and continue the work after he met his own end. I suspect that this test was part of Jesus' own experience of counting the cost.

And so when Jesus talks here of abandoning those three towers of relationships, success, and security, I am inclined to view his words in that light. For I am not convinced that Jesus did not want his followers to have meaningful personal and family relationships. Rather, I believe that Jesus wanted his followers to build their relational towers upon a foundation in the family of God. That means that you can't just pretend that the only people in the world who matter are those close to you, but to recognize all people as beloved – brothers and sisters – in the family of God. It means that you pray for blessings and do good not just for your family and friends, but for your neighbors across the street and around the world. It means that you love not just those who love you, but even those who hate you and do you wrong, yes even your enemies.

And I am not convinced that Jesus did not want his followers to be successful, to have meaningful work, or to know the fulfillment of seeing the fruit of their labor. Rather, I believe that Jesus wanted his followers to build their towers of success and fulfillment on the foundation of the greater good. That means that you can't go through life seeking to build up

your own stores of wealth and power, but instead put all the resources at your disposal to work for the greater good. It means striving to serve not just the needs of you and yours, but the needs of all your fellow human beings, indeed serving even the least. It means working for something bigger than yourself – maybe even having to trust that the fruit will be borne only after you are long gone from this earth.

Nor am I convinced that Jesus did not want his followers to know safety or security. Rather, I believe that Jesus wanted his followers to build their towers of security on a foundation of God's peace – a peace that surpasses our understanding. That means that we do not rest easier because we are financially secure. It means we don't trust in the strength of arms or the advance of technology to keep us safe. It means that no matter what happens – whatever stumbling blocks trip us up or whatever ill may befall us – that we can join in singing "It is well with my soul" and hear the good news that we need "fear not."

In other words, I think Jesus was testing his followers, challenging them – challenging us – to grow up into spiritual maturity. It wasn't so much that he wanted them to stop building their towers. Rather he was aware that just like my kids with their blocks, most people go through life content to be spiritual children, building their towers just for the moment. We seek and nurture relationships to satisfy our immediate emotional needs. We strive for "success" as an end in and of itself and often forget why or for what we are working so hard. And though we seek security in everything from locks and alarms on our doors to a national defense budget that exceeds the GDP of many nations put together, peace always seems to elude us.

So if this is a test, I think Jesus wants to know if his followers are ready, willing, and able to take the next step, to take the building blocks of life that we have been playing with, and use them to build something that will last, something magnificent, something worthy of the name of God.

For the crowds who followed him then, and for those of us sitting in this sanctuary today, the pieces are already there. The building blocks are all around us. We will be working to build those three towers. The question for us is, upon what foundation are we building?

## **Prayers of the People**

The first Labor Day holiday was observed in New York City in 1882, the same year that construction began on the Sagrada Familia Cathedral. And so as we remember all those who labor, and reflect on the work to which Christ calls us all, I invite you to join me in this prayer, written by Pastor Robert Carr of Faith Lutheran Church in Livonia, MI. Please pray with me:

*Creating God,  
 who fashioned this world and all who live in it,  
 who flung the stars into the heavens  
 and set the planets in their courses: we give you praise,  
 for you have given us creative work to do in your world.  
 We thank you, that you have left enough work to be done  
 that we may contribute to your creation  
 with the work of our hands, and hearts, and minds.  
 Give us strength to do the work you have set before us.  
 Give us good work to do all the days of our lives,  
 and when our work is done,  
 give us grace to enjoy your promised rest,  
 laying down the tools of our labor  
 and resting securely in your love  
 and not our own achievements.  
 We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

## **\*Sending**

Upon what foundation are we building the towers of our lives?

As we leave this time and place, may it be with renewed commitment to build upon a Kingdom foundation – the solid rock of Christ Jesus. Amen.