

Ordination Sermon for Rob Blair  
January 27, 2018  
Matthew 7:24-27

*<sup>24</sup> “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”*

First, I want to say that it is an honor to preach today. Rob, you have been generous in calling me your mentor. You were a willing student, eager to learn, willing to listen. It was my joy to work with you in your student internship. Today it will be my joy to recognize you as a colleague and friend.

But before that happens, I want to put on my mentor hat one last time. I want to share some of the wisdom and words that have kept me grounded for twenty-nine years as a congregational pastor. I have a list of ten.

The first piece of wisdom has to do with the parable of the two builders. I grew up in a family of construction workers. Four of my uncles had their own businesses pouring basements and foundations. I always thought of foundations as immovable, rigid, and unyielding – like a rock. But then I moved here, where the ground shakes, and the earth quakes, and it is a different story. The rock has to be able to roll. It has to flex and move. When there are seismic shifts, rigid and unyielding joints and structures are at risk of failure. Today I live on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of a high rise and I’m told that if there is an earthquake the building is built on a system that will allow it to move and flex, rather than collapse.

As I look back over my years in ministry I can see that both are true. We all need those things that help us to stay grounded and focused – those things we believe with all our heart to be true. But sometimes the earth quakes and things happen that call for flexibility and movement. New information, new experiences, new relationships can all challenge what we believe to be foundational.

The question this raises for me is, “How can I speak with conviction and authority and still be open to new learnings and experiences that could rock my world and my theology?” I seriously doubt the folks at FCCO want to hear me end my sermons every week with... “That’s what I think this week,” even though it’s true.

The only thing I know to do, that I will share with you, is speak what you know to be true with confidence and knowing that we evolve as pastors and as people of faith. Invite your congregation to join you on that journey. Some people will pressure you to tell them what to believe, your job is to introduce them to one we follow.

So that is the first gleaning from things I have learned in ministry.

The second is to be yourself. Be authentic. Trust the unique gifts God has given you. The good folks at All Peoples read your papers and interviewed you. They called you to be their pastor. They

called you to be the best version of you, you can be. If they wanted someone else, they would have hired someone else.

The third comes in the form of a reading titled, “Anyway,” by Kent Keith, published in 1968.

People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest person with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest person with the smallest mind.

Think big anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack if you help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you might get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

Four, you will spend time with people in their most vulnerable moments – moments of anguish and sorrow – moments of humiliation and shame – moments of despair and hopelessness – moments of anger and frustration – moments of need. These are holy moments and reflect a sacred trust. In these moments your presence, your calm, your time, your unconditional love will comfort more than anything you say.

Five, busyness is not a measure of faithfulness and interruptions are opportunities. The late Henri Nouwen wrote of a now-famous conversation which helped him think about interruptions as something other than a bother. He wrote, “While visiting the University of Notre Dame, where I had been a teacher for a few years, I met an older experienced professor who had spent most of his life there. And while we strolled over the beautiful campus, he said with a certain melancholy in his voice, “You know . . . my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.” That one statement changed Nouwen’s life. Nouwen later wrote, “It has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am a part . . . All of these interruptions presented themselves as opportunities . . . invited me to look in a new way at my identity before God. Each interruption took something away from me; each interruption offered something new.”

Rob, just a heads up. Sometimes God shows up unannounced.

Number six is something I need to keep working on. At some point in my early years I attended the Lone Ranger school of leadership. I took pride in what I could accomplish all by myself.

Sometimes it is just easier to do things by yourself. But ministry is not about doing what is easy. Collaboration engages people and builds relationships in addition to honoring the gifts and talents of each person. The results produced by collaboration can be inspired and unexpected, better than you could have ever imagined. The process is often just as important as the results.

Number seven is a reminder that our life's work is part of a larger whole. There is a poem read at Oscar Romero's funeral (written by Bishop Ken Untener) that speaks to this truth

**It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.**

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying  
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

When I first started in ministry I thought I had to say it all in every sermon. Now I am content with a single thought or image that is but a piece of a much larger picture. There are, however, occasions when I succumb to the temptation of a ten-point sermon. Accepting the incompleteness of our work allows us to offer it rather than clinging to it until it is perfected or complete.

Number eight, is a quote by Thomas Merton. I love it because the first line grabs me. "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following Your Will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing..."

I would say to you, Rob, I hope you have that desire in all you do.

Number nine has to do with how you define success. Your bio and list of accomplishments is not the same as your legacy. When I am struggling with the feeling that I am not enough I remember the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people  
And the affection of children;  
To earn the appreciation of honest critics

And endure the betrayal of false friends;  
To appreciate beauty; to find the best in others;  
To leave the world a bit better  
Whether by a healthy child, a garden patch,  
Or a redeemed social condition;  
To know even one life has breathed easier because  
You have lived. This is to have succeeded

Finally, number ten brings us full circle to that rock. Storms will come. The earth will quake. In such times it helps to have a song – a song that gives you the strength to hang on. It might be Whitney Houston for you, Rob, but for me it is a traditional Quaker hymn called, “How Can I Keep from Singing.”

<singing>My life flows on in endless song;  
above earth’s lamentation,  
I hear that sweet, though far-off hymn  
that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I’m clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?

<spoken> How can I keep from singing?

Okay Rob, that’s all I’ve got. Except maybe for one thing. You are not alone. A long process of friends and colleagues shares this road with you, myself included.

Amen.