

# **First Fruits or Leftovers?**

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young**  
**Presented on Sunday, November 8, 2009**

## **Sermon Prayer:**

Lord as we gather in your house and as we draw near to the symbols of our faith that remind us of your presence in our lives, we are grateful for all that you have offered to us and pray that as your Word falls upon our hearts this day and this time of worship that you will shape our lives with that Word and help us to follow the way of Christ. Amen.

## **Sermon:**

The story is told, you may have heard this story, about this church in Texas that had fallen upon some very difficult times as a congregation. They were struggling financially and their building was falling into disrepair to the point where it had become hazardous for the members of the church to worship in their sanctuary. And so, the trustees of the church had come up with a plan to replace the sanctuary with a newer sanctuary, but the financial goal just seemed to be too far and out of the reach of the congregation. And so in the midst of all this turmoil that it created - just imagine if we found ourselves in that place today the turmoil it would create for our congregation - well in the midst of the turmoil, a wealthy oil man approached the pastor and he offered to underwrite the entire cost of the new sanctuary if the church would allow him to just make two modifications to their plan that they had devised for the new sanctuary. Well you have to understand how pleased the people were. The trustees thought that this man was a messenger from God an angel from God sent to save them from their situation. And so they agreed. And the stipulation was that the man would not reveal to the congregation the two changes to the plan until the day of dedication when the doors would be open to the new sanctuary.

And so everyone waited for that very special day. The new church was constructed and they saw the walls going up, and they saw the workers on the site getting the new church building all ready. It was the day for dedication, the first day that the members of the church would be able to enter the sanctuary. And the doors opened and the first worshipers stepped in to find one pew in the very back of the sanctuary. And they thought this is odd, but they sat down. And as soon as that pew was filled, it immediately came to the front of the sanctuary and another pew popped up waiting to be filled. Well, after a couple of times of that happening, the people caught on that this man was trying to move us closer to the front. Obviously one of those preachers who comes in and

says, would you people in the back please move forward, it gets empty up here. Well, the preacher was actually feeling quite good about this. There's everybody that's arrive for worship, they've all come forward whether they liked it or not, and he begins to preach. And gets a little full of himself and preaches a little longer than he was accustomed to preaching. At noontime he was halfway through his sermon when all of a sudden the church bell began to ring noon and the pulpit descended into the ground. I just love that story because we all get it there. You know, the preacher and the people we all sort a get ourselves revealed in that story.

I share that because last spring when the city was getting ready to do their rebuilding and reconstruction of George Street, one of the meetings was an engineer from the city had to come and inspect the basement underneath this sanctuary to make sure that the foundation was sturdy enough. How many of you, just a show of hands, how many of you have ever been down in the basement of this sanctuary? That's great. A lot more than I figured. Well this engineer went down into our basement and he looked at the foundation that this sanctuary is constructed on and he said this church is going nowhere. This church is solidly grounded; your foundation he said was overbuilt and will be here for years and years and years. We have a nice strong foundation that is underneath our sanctuary.

Now that made me feel good. I don't think Bill I ever shared that with the trustees, but it made me feel good about our church. That was a good thing for me. I always worry about foundations because if you start having problems with your foundation, you've got a problem. And that was good news to hear that. I just had to go to the reading from the gospel today that a wise man built his house on rock so that it won't sink, so that it will stay nice and firm; it'll stay in place and withstand the forces of nature. And the foolish man builds his house on the sand, and I think of the Jersey shore and of the storms that often come up the coastline especially during the winter months. We haven't had any hurricanes lately that have come up to do major damage but there are some Nor'easters that come in during the winter months that at least erode the beach away into the ocean and threaten and jeopardize some of the homes that have been built on the sand of our barrier islands.

Have you ever gone to the shore and just gotten your feet into the water a little bit and let the waves sort of wash over your feet? And as you stand there you start to sink a little bit. If you stay there long enough you really do start to sink and you can feel those nice gentle waves. It's not very good ground to build on; it's not stable; it's not firm. And so, a house that is built on sand is a house that is in trouble. Our house of worship is built on a good solid foundation. Now, there are those in the life of the church who say, you know the really important thing about the church are the

people. It's really not about the building, it's about the people. And part of me says amen to that. Because a building like this without people inside, well you begin to wonder what use is it. What purpose is it serving? So the fact that the people are here, that we gather here on a regular basis to be with our sisters and brothers in Christ, and to worship as a community, that's a pretty important thing.

But the other side of that is that some people just want to ignore the building. Oh, I can worship anywhere. Well, yeah, you can. But there's something about gathering together as a body into a building like this and drawing near to the symbols of our faith. There's something about that that's really important for the foundation of our own spiritual homes and our own spiritual lives. That there's something about being here that is really important for us. And we can't always put that into words, I know that I missed our Disciple class last week, but one of the things that the Disciple class spoke about was the importance of our church building. And people really couldn't put it into words, but it's important for us. And if this building were no longer here, where would we gather? Where would we gather as a community? Where would we find our identity? And I think this building helps to help us to find our identity as sisters and brothers in Christ.

I share that with you because next week is Pledge Sunday and that is a very important Sunday for us as church because Pledge Sunday is what moves us into our next year as a congregation. And so it is a very important time in our life together to say, yes indeed this is important for me; this is important for us as a church; this is important for our community here in New Brunswick. That this building, these facilities make a difference in our lives individually, our lives together as a community, and the life of those who are outside of these walls today; this place makes a real difference. And the reality of that is that this year's budget, we projected it would cost us about \$350,000 to be a congregation here in this place; to be a faithful, living organism for God.

When that budget was presented to the Administrative Council it was a plan of faith because our finance people in all of the best crunching of numbers they could do, said, we believe we can only raise \$313,000 of the \$350,000 that we need. So we've had for several years a deficit budget. We've had a budget that has relied on income from our endowment fund that can legitimately be used, legally be used to subsidize our current expenses. We've had to rely on money from the trustees to meet our current expenses.

Let me share with you little bit of about what that means. I've heard several people say to me, you know, why can't we air condition Fellowship Hall? What's wrong with the trustees, why can they put in air conditioning? That would be a price tag of about \$20,000. And if the trustees didn't have to bail out our current expenses with the endowment fund, they

could possibly have funds to do that project. We have a lot of deferred maintenance around our building; if you look carefully you'll see it. The windows in our education building, when it rains there's one of the classrooms over there where the water just leaks right in. The windows are old, they need to be replaced. We're guessing probably \$500,000 to do that. Maybe it would be less but that's a pretty safe guesstimate because the windows are way too big for the rooms and we need to minimize those to minimize the heat that comes into the building in the summertime. If you go around the sanctuary of our building and look outside way up high on the stucco, you will see evidence of deterioration where some of that stucco has broken off. And this winter I guarantee you, if water infiltrates behind that, we'll start to see when it freezes, pieces of the stucco falling off. And that's not a good thing but these are all high price items for doing the work of God in this place.

So I share that with you to help you think of your pledge for 2010. About \$36,000 - \$37,000 of our current expense budget we figure is going to come, hopefully, from our trustees and from our endowment fund. What would happen if next year our pledges exceeded that deficit? And our pledges actually made up for that, so that the trustees money could be freed up to take care of some issues with our buildings and perhaps even begin to create a new ministry with those funds; to reach out to people who are in need right here in our city. There are all kinds of possibilities but it really counts on us coming together as a congregation and offering to God our first fruits.

Several people in the church have been surprised to learn that Cindy and I are tithers. And they say, what does that mean? You tithe after you pay your income taxes or you tithe after you pay your mortgage and car payment? We tithe on our gross income. We give our first fruits to God. Because we feel blessed by God and our lives are shaped by God, our lives depend upon God, and so we put our money there as well as our lives. And tithing is about offering God our first fruits, the best of what we have to offer, not the leftovers. Not after all the bills are paid saying, well what do we have left for God?

Now there is a story in scripture where Jesus is sitting across from the treasury of the temple. He and his disciples are watching people place their financial support in the offering box to the work of the temple and offering it to God. And that story goes on to say that there was a widow who came up to the temple with the last two copper coins that she had, all that she had, and she came up to that treasury box and placed the last two cents that she had to rub together in that box as an offering of gratitude to God. The good church people of Jesus' day saw that, and Jesus and his disciples saw them start to talk about it with each other. Look at her, look what she's putting in, what's wrong with her? And they started ridiculing her for her gift. And Jesus pointed out to his disciples

that in that moment, that woman had put in more than all of those who were watching her combined had put in - because she put in 100%, not 10%.

The only thing I wish Jesus would've done with that story is I wish he would've said we need to stop bleeding the poor dry. In fact I wish he would've said one of those wealthy guys watching her put her last two coppers in, should've gone over to her and said no, no, no – you hold on to those; I will put in for you and let me, please come to my home, let me feed you. And I think that's what Jesus was about. So our pledge campaign is not about looking at people in our membership who have very little to live on and saying you've got to give more, but it is about us coming together as a congregation and offering God the best we have to offer. No one should starve, no child should go hungry, no child should be without clothing, without a home, no child's education should be sacrificed for giving to the life of the church.

But I hope that as you consider what you will offer to our God next Sunday that you will consider the great needs of our congregation and the great opportunity we have as a church to be living witnesses to the living God. The great opportunity we have to become a beacon of hope to the people of this city. I get to see it every day that school is in session in our education building; the hope that our church facility brings to those families. You don't get to see that, I get to see it every day. You don't get to see the people who come to me and are at their ropes end. And I am able, because of your generosity to be able to give them a financial gift that will help them and that will support them. And they know it comes from the hearts of the people of this church. My friends, we are a beacon of hope to our city; we are beacon of hope for ourselves as well. And together as we build our lives of faith on the foundation of God's holy word, we will be strengthened for the ministry together. Thanks be to God. Amen.