

ORDINARY TIME TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY YEAR B 2009 HOMILY

HOMILY ON BUILDING THE CHURCH

(Wisdom 7: 7-11; Hebrews 4: 12-13; Mark 10: 17-30)

FOLLOW ME

At one time in my life, I had the opportunity to work as a research assistant in the Department of the History of Medicine at the University of Minnesota. I worked closely with an eminent surgeon named Owen Wangenstein who had an interest in history and who was a pioneer in training open heart and heart transplant surgeons. One of the professors in our department was a very stodgy fellow with a very stodgy wife. Their only saving grace was that they gave pretty good parties and served only the best liquor. This couple openly told people that they had decided never to have children because they wanted to concentrate on their careers. Well, God had other plans. All of the sudden the stodgy wife got pregnant and this was a great surprise to everyone, especially the couple. All of us associated with the department wondered out loud what the fate of this child would be. But by God's grace, the pregnancy totally changed this couple. Apparently they never even thought about abortion or even adoption. Rather, they embraced this new situation and accepted completely the son who was born to them in due course. We joked about how little Georgie would fare with such stodgy parents. But lo and behold, they loved this boy and George was their pride and joy. Naturally, he had every advantage growing up and, from what I have heard he has had a pretty normal life. In fact, he is now in his middle thirties, is married, and has provided the formerly stodgy couple with grandchildren. God truly is a surprise!

October is traditionally Respect Life Month and the above story is a great pro-life story. A child is an invitation to accept the future with hope and love. A pregnancy is an opportunity to embrace with generosity God's gift of life that is passed down from generation to generation. In our Gospel today (from Mark), Jesus offers a similar invitation to the man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus challenges him to go beyond the commandments, which are the minimum requirement for holiness, to make a true sacrifice of his riches to help the poor. But the man was unable to take up this challenge, at least at that time, because he was so attached to his possessions. Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples (and therefore also to us) that wealth can take the place of God and can literally keep us from salvation. But he also teaches that God can soften us up if we are open to him and to the sharing that is so God-like. Only the Grace of Repentance can make it possible for those who pride themselves on their possessions to get to heaven and to enjoy true life here on earth as well. Finally in answer to Peter's question about the rewards of self-giving, Jesus assures him (and us) that our generosity will usher us into the fullness of life both here and hereafter and will fill our lives with deep meaning. The rich man, in effect, refuses the only future worth having – a future with God and his people in the community we call the church.

This weekend I am once again before you to invite you to help make our new church building a reality. I am again knocking on your door, hoping you will open it to embrace the future of St. Paul's Parish. Since I have come here as your pastor, I have been convinced of the need for a new worship space. So have most of you. We have come a long way. And now we are very close. You and I have the opportunity to

choose in a dramatic way the gift of being part of something new and lasting – something that will give our life deep meaning and will impart to generations to come a legacy that is wrapped in love. Like the rich man in the Gospel, we have a choice to let loose of some of what God has given us and to share with the community now and for a long time to come. Like the stodgy couple, we can by God's grace welcome the gift of life God offers and so allow God to transform us with the only real joy – the incomparable joy of self-giving.

As I have said, we are now closer than ever to beginning the building of our new church. Our Building Project is now five plus years old. During this time, we have developed a Master Plan based on your input in a Parish Survey. We have made extensive improvements in the school, built the new Activities Center, provided more parking, and made extensive site improvements. In addition, we have bought property to allow for growing room and to make a future home for parish athletics. We have asserted all along that we intend to do all that parishioners have said is needed at St. Paul's. Of course, the biggest need is the new church. We have stated that we had to accomplish three things to start construction on the church: get a good price, raise the \$12 million in pledges that has been our goal, and secure a loan from the diocese. I am happy to announce that we have been successful in hitting two of these three targets. This summer we got an excellent bid from Corna Kokosing and we have chosen them to be our contractors for the worship space. In addition, we heard last week from Bishop Campbell that the diocese is willing to extend to us a significant loan to make our dream of a new church come true. However, the bishop and his advisors have stipulated that St. Paul's will still be required to reach our goal of \$12 million in pledges. Right now, we have \$10.5 million pledged. Practically speaking (and this is the bottom line) the diocese is requiring that we raise another \$1.5 million in pledges before we can break ground. I and my advisors are highly optimistic that we can, as a parish, meet this goal in the next few weeks so that we can start the church. Please note that the diocese at this time is requiring only more pledges, not more cash, for us to begin building. After construction commences, the bishop has asked us to raise some more in pledges and then we will be granted a diocesan loan.

I am keenly aware of the significant sacrifices that many of you have made and are making to help us to get this great work under way and completed. Thank you for being part of the campaign in 2006 and for increasing and extending your pledges last year if you did so. I encourage you to continue timely payments on your pledges because this is critical for the progress of the project. At this time, I invite all who have not pledged or who have made only a token pledge to step up and be part of history here at St. Paul's. We currently have the involvement of 63% of families in this endeavor. If we get to 70%, I am confident we will get to the needed \$1.5 million in additional pledges as well. We cannot let just some families do it all. We need everyone to do their part. Jesus invites all, not just a few, to embrace a generous life-style. Of course, I fully understand that some cannot give because of their circumstances. If you pledged in 2006, I ask that you consider increasing your pledge at this time or extending it by one year. I also invite those who have so faithfully paid off their pledges to consider making a second pledge at this time. By the way, I have already extended my pledge for a second time for another year. In order to keep you updated, I have requested our staff to send you a mailing this week that will include the following: a brochure which will contain more details of our building plans and some information about giving options; a quarterly statement for all who have pledged or given any money to the campaign; and

a pledge envelope. I invite you after Mass to view renderings of the interior of our new church in the vestibule [breezeway]. These renderings will also be available on the parish website. One bit of really good news is that the diocese has given permission for us to begin some preliminary site work on the ugly hill of dirt outside. It will soon be flattened out and put in place so as to expedite work when the bishop is able to give us permission to start construction (which will be as soon as we raise the additional \$1.5 million in pledges).

In closing, I would have to say that your prayers have kept me going these past six years as your pastor. The Building Committee and I have experienced the power of prayer too as we have wrestled with this project. I have been deeply moved by the depth of the commitment of so many who have given so generously. And I have been brought almost to tears when folks have told me that they are offering up their illness and suffering for the building of our new church. You know, some Scripture scholars have speculated that the rich man in today's Gospel may have come back to Jesus and received another chance to be truly alive through the miracle of self-giving. Today is a time for us to search our hearts in the light of our need to practice generosity which is so human because it is so divine. Remember that we are made in the image of God who is totally self-emptying in Jesus Christ. Today Jesus says to us as he said to the rich man in the Gospel: "come follow me!" Finally, I return to the formerly stodgy couple whose story began my homily. A baby boy stretched their hearts to make them a joyful couple and a joyful family. St. Paul's is a parish with a really big heart. Let us embrace the joy of a generous future!