

Invisible Foundation

3 September 2006
(Labor Day)

Bible passage: **Matthew 7:24-25** (*The Message*)

“These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, home owner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who builds his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.”

Sermon nugget: The “invisible foundation,” the rock, of any organization consists of all the hands that work to make it solid. In the case of The Garden, it’s a cadre of solid volunteers, and this is a day to thank them for their labors to make The Garden what it is.

The Bible passage we have for this morning is found toward the end of a collection of the teachings of Jesus that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Three chapters of the gospel of Matthew contain some of the essentials that Jesus shared to help his listeners get on the right track in life. In the segment from which our passage comes, we have a group of thoughts about how we act, and what our actions show about our lives.

Our passage reads like this: “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, home owner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who builds his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.”

I think Jesus is trying to point out some of the basic ingredients that we need to incorporate into our life in order to live the kind of life God would like us to live. To understand those basics is to have a grasp of the foundation on which we build our lives; they are what make us “rock solid.” The analogy Jesus uses is that of a carpenter building a house. It’s important to know what’s under the house, because if it’s shifting sand, the house will move and collapse. However, if that house is built on solid rock, it will not move, and it can withstand whatever storms assail it. So it is with our lives.

What are the solid pieces are which our lives are to be built? I think Jesus wanted people to understand that there’s more to life than just uttering some words proclaiming our faith, or our care for people; we are to live our lives in tune with the words we speak. In other words, we have to “walk the talk,” and not just “talk the talk.” If we say we have faith, it will show up in our actions and deeds. It shows in everything we do.

To me, that means that having God’s love in our hearts is a transforming kind of thing that causes us to want to share what we have with others, and the most precious thing you and I have to share is ourselves. Even more specifically, the most precious commodity that we have these days is time, and when we know God’s love is real, we want to share our time in ways that make a difference and help this world be a little better place.

What I’m talking about is the giving of the precious gift of time; I’m talking about volunteering. Now, I’m assuming that we all know what we mean by the word “volunteer,” but to avoid any confusion, let me be clear. A volunteer is someone who chooses freely to do something, without being compelled by law, and without doing it for compensation.

Volunteers are vitally important in every community and in every organization. I did a little checking on the data to see how critical volunteering is, and found the statistics from September 2004 through September 2005. Apt for Labor Day, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor reports that about 65.4 million people, or 28.8% of our population, gave their time in one way or another. That basically comes down to one out of every four persons serving as a volunteer, and that’s been pretty much a steady statistic over the last three years.

Furthermore, this data tells us that about ¼ of men and about 1/3 of women did volunteer work in the year that ended in September of 2005. By age, those between the ages of 35 and 54 had the highest rates for volunteering, but teenagers also reported a high percentage of giving their time to help others. The lowest rates were reported for those in their twenties and those age 65 and over.

Almost universally, volunteers give of themselves in order to make their communities better places in which to live, and the gift of their time gives us all a win/win situation. Obviously, the time that is given results in some valuable services being provided that would otherwise go untended, but volunteering is also good for the volunteer.

One Canadian study confirmed that volunteering improves self esteem, reduces blood pressure, enhances the immune system and combats stress. It helps those who are giving their time create new social networks, and lessens social isolation. And there are the intangible rewards that simply cannot be measured, like the way in which a life is touched, inspired or changed by the simple gift of a little of our time. As someone has said, “Volunteers are not paid because they are worthless, but because they are priceless.”

I think it will be interesting to see the new data that will come out when September ends, because you probably remember that one year ago right now was when hurricane Katrina was pounding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and since that time, there have been myriads of teams of volunteers trekking to the south to do what they can to help the recovery effort get underway. You may remember that some folks from The Garden were a part of that effort, serving Thanksgiving dinner for 3500 people in Gulfport, Mississippi. They were able to touch lives and make a difference by their presence.

Each February, a team of folks goes south to build a Habitat house, and that will be happening again this year. Please contact John and Jeanne Anne Wertz to indicate your interest in joining the group. Just recently, Gardeners have stepped up mightily to volunteer their time. About 60 of you offered to help load food bags and to hand out food through the Lord's Pantry and the good work of Lucius Newsom.

A couple of weeks after that effort, we put out a call for backpacks and school supplies for School 20 and other IPS students in need, and once again, Gardeners went to work. We've collected well over a hundred backpacks, and that took time and effort on everyone's part to make the drive a huge success. Each one who has helped has contributed toward those statistics I cited earlier, but you've done something else, too. I would bet that each one of you would say that your life has been enriched, and I know you have touched and enriched the lives of others.

One thing we need to note is that volunteering isn't just for those outside The Garden. We have tons of volunteers who are the very foundation of The Garden. Without them, we wouldn't have a band, or bagels and donuts; we wouldn't have anything on screen to read and watch; we wouldn't have programs in our hands, or Garden to Go to take home with us.

I think many of you would be amazed if you came in the door either at Beef and Boards around 7:00 or Oak Hill around 8:00 on Sunday morning to see the flurry of activity. Instruments are loaded in; bagels are unloaded from cars; supplies are carried from the back rooms to the tables; cameras are set up; tech systems are tested. That's just before we even think about beginning the service, and afterwards, at both sites, the process is

eversed, with everything cleaned up and cleared out so the businesses that so kindly allow us to use their space can transform back into their business. Here at B&B, we ice glasses and pour waters, vacuum the floors, and walk out the back doors as the guests are walking in the front for the matinee.

Things don't just happen on Sundays. During the week, our various teams are at work making sure all the things that need to be covered are happening. Our Development Team oversees a nearly \$500,000 budget each year, and plans creative ways to raise the funds needed to support The Garden. The Leadership Team tries to foresee where The Garden is headed, and what the future will hold. There's a Marketing Team that's focused on getting the word out about us, and a Comfort and Care Team that offers prayers, their presence and help when Gardeners need a friend. Garden Kids would not happen without the wonderful volunteers who plan and implement work for the kids that accompanies each Sunday's theme.

The list goes on and on: the Message Team, the 10% Team, Prayer Team....All these and more...Each and every team is filled with volunteers—people who are giving their precious gift of time to make The Garden go, and there's always room for you to join them. Without each and every one of them, we would come to a screeching halt. I want us to take a minute right now, and show our appreciation for all the Gardeners who give so much of their time. Let's have our volunteers stand, and give them a hand. (I want to give them something else, too....What????)

We don't say it enough, but I want to say it loud and clear on this Labor Day—THANK YOU! Thank you for the labor you share with The Garden in such loving ways. We are all inspired by your wonderful gift of love.

Closing:

The poet Kahlil Gibran once wrote, "[Work is love made visible.](#)" The work our wonderful volunteers do here at The Garden, as well as beyond these walls is truly "love made visible." Thank you.

As we leave here this morning, maybe each of us could consider how we can offer our gift of time. Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.