



Sermon of October 24, 1999



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"THE CATHEDRAL WITHIN"

I Kings 8:14-21

II Corinthians 9:6-15

It has sneaked up on us so that perhaps you didn't notice. But we live in one of the most prosperous times in this generation, perhaps in this century. Unemployment is at a record low. Inflation is minuscule. The stock market seems to defy everybody's prediction, and keeps on going up and up.

We used to talk about the richest people being millionaires. Now we talk about them being billionaires. I read this week that three of Microsoft's original founders have more wealth combined than something like two hundred of the world's poorest nations.

And what's more, this generation will not only generate more wealth than any other generation, they will also inherit more wealth than any other generation. The question is, what will they do

with it? I believe that that is the most pressing moral question of our age.

Prior to this generation only a few had to answer the question of what to do with wealth. Some of them, like the Rockefeller family, were raised in the Protestant ethic of personal morality and social responsibility, so the second, and then following generations in that family became philanthropists. For a hundred years now they, and other families like them, have given millions and millions of dollars to the social welfare, the well being of all people.

It remains to be seen if this generation, with so much more, and so many more capable of doing it, will feel the same responsibility. This generation is largely secular, raised without religious training. Most of them have been raised by television, and its ethic of consumption, getting all you can and holding it for yourself. A little girl was being taught subtraction in school. The teacher asked, "If you have three apples, and I ask for one, how many would you have left?" She said, "Three."

Philanthropy is not a major virtue in a consumer oriented society. Accumulation is the major virtue. But if that doesn't change, I really fear for this country. If we continue the way we are going, we will have a society of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, surpassing what we used to condemn when we looked at third world countries.

I believe that God gives nations opportunities for greatness. I think that we are approaching such a time in our generation. We know what society's problems are. We know what to do to correct those problems. Up to now we lacked either the will or the resources to do it. But today we have the resource in the private sector. There is enough wealth accumulated by those who believe in reduced government bureaucracy, who believe that welfare should be a community matter, or a personal matter, to change the world.

Do you know what that's called? That's called "philanthropy." Philanthropy is a Greek word meaning "love of mankind." The assumption is that philanthropists are moved by the plight of their fellow human beings to do something about it. Do you remember that famous scene in Dickens's *Christmas Carol*? Jacob Marley's ghost comes back to visit Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge welcomes him, compliments him by saying, "You were a good man of business." Marley replies, "Business. Mankind was my business. Their common welfare was my business."

What he was talking about is called philanthropy. What he was doing was warning Ebenezer Scrooge, who had no love for mankind, with your resources you better be a philanthropist. It's a moral obligation for the wealthy to be philanthropists.

The Dickens's story is a judgment parable. Scrooge is given a glimpse of what his fate will be if he doesn't change, if he continues living the way he is living. It is reminiscent of Jesus' parable, entitled, "The Rich Man and Lazarus." I am sure that Dickens used that parable as the model for his story.

The parable is about a rich man who dined sumptuously at his table every day, and a poor man, covered with sores, who camped outside the door of the rich man. Each day, to enter his house, the rich man had to step over the poor man. The poor man dies and goes to heaven. The rich man dies and goes to hell, where he cries out to God, "Send Lazarus to warn my brothers

what will happen to them if they don't repent." God tells the rich man, "They won't change because a man comes back from the dead to warn them. Besides, they should already have known this from Moses and the prophets."

Scrooge, the rich man, who also knows the prophetic message about justice for the poor, nevertheless is visited by a man come back from the dead. And he repents. He becomes a philanthropist, and adopts Marley's creed, "Mankind was my business."

There is a man in our time who has heard this message, and is enjoying remarkable success in spreading the word. His name is Bill Shore. He's only 43 years old. He had a career in politics, working in presidential campaigns. Then he became convinced that the private sector has the power to transform the life of this nation if it only has the will.

His mission now is to convince business people that philanthropy is the pathway to fulfillment of their lives, the fulfillment that they have not experienced in a consumer ethic society. He organized his own project, called "Share Our Strength," to attack the problem of hunger. The shame of a nation with such enormous wealth is that there are children who live in conditions that bring about malnourishment in their lives. He set out to do something about that.

But he is better known for his speaking, and for a wonderful book that he has written, entitled *The Cathedral Within*, in which he tells the story of innovative non-profits that operate profitably, because people who are trained and experienced in business either volunteer, or are hired by these non-profits to manage them in a business-like manner.

One of those non-profits is called Chrysalis. It is based in Los Angeles, a training center, training people to move from welfare to employment. It was headed by Maura Mannes. Maura Mannes was the first woman CEO of a major Hollywood studio. She was on top of the world. She had a fabulous salary. She had everything she ever wanted. Then she was in an automobile accident. The recuperation gave her time to reflect on her life, during which she asked, "Why am I doing this? Why don't I have more fulfillment?"

During that time somebody introduced her to Chrysalis. They told her how much good it does, but that it was in financial straits and needed a business person to manage its operation. She decided to look into it, offered her services, became the CEO of Chrysalis, making an enormous success out of it, getting national recognition for it. She decided not to go back into business, but to make mankind her business. Her national recognition opened other doors for her, and she is now an officer of the Ford Foundation.

Bill Shore's point is the same as Dickens's. You will do good with philanthropy. But just as important, you will feel good doing it. Your life will be transformed. You will feel better than you have ever felt in your life, because there is something in you that wants to do good. There is something in you that wants to be a part of something greater than yourself.

Shore envisions a great society where everybody is united, striving toward the same goal, each one using the gifts that he or she has, finding personal fulfillment in offering their gift.

He says there was a time when that happened, it was in the era of cathedral building. He

suggests that we can learn from cathedral builders what life is all about. Those were the days when communities were united with a common purpose. Each individual experienced a sense of worth because they contributed something to the whole. He listed five principles of cathedral building. I will lift up only three.

The first is: Devote your life to something so big that you will never see it completed. Most of us do just the opposite. We work with something manageable. That is what we look for in a job, or career, or a project to give ourselves to. We invest our talent and our money until it becomes something big, or until it is completed. Then we step back, admire and enjoy our accomplishment, point to it, and say, "I did that. I reached my goal. I can retire now. I have a sense of satisfaction that what I set out to do I accomplished."

Cathedral builders don't work that way. They don't start small. They start big, with a master plan that is so grand that they will never see the completion of it, and so vast that they will only have one small part in it. Cathedral builders are those who use their gifts, their talent, their money, to make that kind of a vision come true.

It was no accident that cathedrals were created by Christians. The heart of Christian faith is the dream of a Kingdom of God. A life that is faithful to that kingdom is a life that invests itself in something that it will never see fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom that is not of this world, but a kingdom that will transform this world. We will not build the Kingdom of God with our puny efforts. But if each one contributes their own gift, as large or as small as it may be, it will help to change the world as well as transform the lives of those who contribute.

Which leads to the second principle of cathedral building: To build a cathedral, everyone in the community must take part. Artisans and craftsmen cannot build a cathedral by themselves. They need the effort of everyone in the community as a base of support. If our society is to solve the problems that it faces today, it will take the involvement of everyone, the involvement of all institutions.

I am intrigued with the campaign rhetoric of presidential candidates. At least some of them seem to agree that social problems are not going to be solved by government, but by what they call "faith communities." That's political language for "churches." And I agree with that, because it has been sufficiently demonstrated that people's lives need to be transformed if they are going to make the changes necessary in their life to get out of the squalor of poverty.

The Methodist movement began in England 200 years ago as that kind of a movement. They went to the poor people, transformed their lives, and in one generation they moved from poverty into the middle class. Some historians concluded that the preaching of the Methodists prevented a French Revolution from coming to England. That's our history.

So I agree. It's up to the churches. But not to just transform the lives of the poor. Not if we are going to transform society. We are to transform the lives of the rich as well. Why is it that we will diagnose poverty as a spiritual problem, but not see that the rich also have a spiritual problem?

We will say, the poor need a purpose in their life, a sense of meaning in their life to motivate

them, a discipline to put aside the habits that keep them from the fullness of life. Why don't we say that of the rich? That they need a sense of purpose in their life, and disciplines that will bring them to the fullness of life? The poor need the discipline to save. The rich need the discipline to give.

According to the New Testament, in fact, according to the whole Bible, and especially in the teachings of Jesus, the people with the spiritual problem are not the poor, with so little, but the rich, who have so much, and who keep it all to themselves.

Each year we have a stewardship campaign in this church, and each year I hear the same thing, "The church is always asking for money." Which isn't true, incidentally. You all hear from the church every week in the *Outlook*, urging you to participate in the myriad of activity, hundreds of activities over a period of a year, that we offer to enrich your life and to aid and encourage you in your spiritual development, to give you opportunities for service in this community. Once a year we ask you to underwrite those ministries with a pledge to the church.

We didn't invent this. We didn't invent the "every member canvas," nor did the Methodist Church. You heard in the epistle lesson for this morning from II Corinthians the record of the first church financial campaign, just years after the founding of the Church, Paul taking an offering from all his churches for the poor in the church in Jerusalem.

Paul makes it clear that generosity is a sign of spiritual health. If you cannot give, then you don't understand what Christianity is all about. Christianity is about those who realize how much they have received, "grace upon grace," and in response want to be a part of that community that is making it possible for others in this world to experience that same redemptive power of grace in their lives.

That is what we do once a year, invite you to participate with your response to God's grace, by constructing something worthwhile in this community, a cathedral, if you will, a vision of what the world can become. We want you to be a part in making that.

Which brings me to the third principle of cathedral building: Cathedrals are built upon the foundations of earlier efforts. When Jean and I were in Germany a few years ago, we crawled around cathedrals. I love to do that. Others say, "You've seen one cathedral, you've seen them all." But I don't feel that way. I'm fascinated with the nooks and crannies of old cathedrals, especially the crypts and the vaults, down where the graves and the bones are. Down there you will notice that the supporting foundations in so many of those cathedrals, the footings on which the present-day cathedral rests, are the walls of an ancient church, often going back to Roman times.

I am very much aware of that in this church. We moved out here from downtown, so we are not literally built on the foundation of earlier churches, but we are spiritually. I am very much aware that where we are today is because of what others held as a dream yesterday. We enjoy all of this because they had a vision that they never saw fulfilled, but they were faithful to it anyway.

On March 3, 1968, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., just a month before he was killed, preached a

sermon in the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, his home church, where his father and his grandfather had been pastors. He was raised in that church so he knew the history of the congregation, how as a people they had a dream of liberation, and how they sacrificed in order to realize the dream.

He used as his text for that sermon the passage read to us this morning from I Kings.

Now it was in the heart of David my father to build a house in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to David my father, "Whereas it was in thy heart to build a house unto my name, thou didst well that it was in thine heart."

King's style of preaching, as you know, was to take a sentence and add one story upon another, in a crescendo that concludes with a challenge. He did that with this line. "Thou didst well that it was in thine heart."

He listed the great men and woman, beginning in biblical times, throughout history, and into the present day, who set out to build temples, or cathedrals of the soul, and who never saw them completed. They were not great because they accomplished what they set out to do. They were great because it was in their heart to build a temple.

Greatness, the fulfillment of life, comes from three principles. First, give yourself to something so big that you will never see its completion. Second, join others in offering your gifts to build it. And third, when you realize the debt that you owe those who have gone before you, and pay it to those who will come after.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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