

Under Construction: Legacy

Open

We have had some very good guest preachers recently. About a month ago Peter Tupou told us about agape love. He made such an impression that "Agape Hall" became one of the top five choices to name the new addition. Then a couple weeks ago Diane Adams came up here and shared some great children's books, including one she wrote herself that was Amazon's book of the year! The bar has been set very high for guest preachers, and I'm more than a little bit nervous as I stand here thinking how I'm going to get over it.

I really didn't mean to get myself in this position, and indeed I tried to escape when Jill first approached me. She said "we're doing this whole series of sermons about construction, and you'd be perfect to give one of them as we get the building project started."

I'm pretty quick on my feet, so I tried to deflect.

"I have a great title for a sermon" I said, thinking I might put her off. How about "The Important Role of Misogyny in Construction Projects?" But nevertheless she persisted, and here I am.

Set up of the word "legacy"

So since I still want to be welcome here when I'm done today I thought I'd save the misogyny talk for another time, and instead talk about "legacy".

What does it mean? In my career as an IT professional it usually refers to old, slow, fragile, unstable software. Or maybe you're thinking of the undeserving kid who squeaks into Harvard or Stanford because of Daddy's history and donations.

But of course there's another way to think of legacy, a positive way. Our legacy is the gift we give to, and the way we will be remembered by, those who come after us. What do we want our legacy to be?

Historical perspective

This question of legacy is not new to us, it's been with us throughout human history. And it's often tied to buildings.

In the modern era you could think about Carnegie Hall in New York City, built by the steel baron Andrew Carnegie in 1891. At his peak he was worth more than \$300B in today's dollars - that's about 3 times the richest person in the world today. He also built a university in Pittsburgh and founded thousands of libraries around the world.

Or closer to home we have Disneyland, built in just a year in 1955 by Walt Disney who wished to build a bigger and better park than the ones he had been visiting with his daughters in the years prior. It's an impressive place.

But if you go back further in time there are some even more impressive legacies.

Consider the Palace at Versailles, built by Louis XIV in the late 1600s. Versailles cost several billion dollars to build, 60% of France's wealth at the time. Running the palace represented between 6-25% of the French national economy. It had so many fountains that the water supply was not sufficient to run them - when the king would walk the grounds servants would run ahead turning fountains on and off strategically so he would think they were all on.

(Coincidentally, this is the exact same way we plan to operate the waterfall Jill wants on the front of the new building... please don't tell her!)

Or going back even further - consider Khufu's pyramid at Giza.

To build the pyramid required 20 years of moving 900 tons of stone every day! There are about 2.3 million blocks in the pyramid. That means for 20 years workers placed a 3-ton stone block every 5 minutes, day and night, 24 hours a day. It was the tallest man-made structure in the world for 3,800 years.

So for thousands of years of human history people have been building structures as a way to leave a mark on the world after they're gone. And they've done it in some huge, spectacular ways that seem unfathomable today.

Our building project as legacy

Let's return to now. We will, tomorrow, start the 3rd phase of our building project. About 20 years ago this beautiful sanctuary was planned and completed. And about 20 years before that our founders bought this property and built Covenant Hall.

Now, right on schedule, it's our turn to continue the legacy that is Redlands UCC with our Building Up Reaching Out project. It's an honor for us to join those who came before us in this way!

Unlike Versailles or the great pyramids (as grand as those projects were) I would venture say this one could be more significant on the cosmic scale. Why? Because our project is not just about brick and mortar. At its core we are building a safe space for people to be who they truly are in a loving, non-judgmental human family. And not only are we building that safe space, we are building the capability to better educate ourselves and our children in the gospel of radical inclusion that is the core of this community, so that we and they will carry that safe space out into the world.

The Gospel of radical inclusion

I want to tell you a true story I heard this week about how powerful the gospel of radical inclusion can be.

This story is about a famous preacher named Carlton Pearson. Perhaps you've heard of him. There's a new biographical movie about him on Netflix called "Come Sunday." If you haven't seen it yet I definitely recommend it.

Carlton is a black man who grew up in San Diego then attended Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He became Oral Robert's closest confidant alongside his son Richard Roberts.

Carlton has a gift for preaching. He founded a church in Tulsa in 1971. 20 years later his church had grown to where they had 6,000 attendees every week, with \$60,000 in weekly contributions. His church was made up of equal parts black

and white members in one of the most segregated cities in America. He was on TV, he ministered to Presidents. He was a big deal!

There was just one problem for Carlton, and that was that he believed and preached that people had to choose to be saved or else they'd go to hell. Think about how heavy that burden must be for someone who really believes that doctrine!

Every time he would meet someone new he would be thinking about how he would have to save them.

He believed many of his ancestors were living in eternal damnation.

Every time he got on a plane, no matter how exhausted he was, he would feel obligated to talk to his seatmates to try to save them before they landed. He'd say to himself "Yes, I'm tired - but that person is going to burn in hell for eternity if I don't do something about it."

One day he was watching a documentary about the genocide in Rwanda and had a life-changing revelation. 800,000 people were killed in the span of 100 days in 1994. They were not "saved", and didn't even ever have a chance to choose to become saved. Carlton just couldn't reconcile how a loving God would drag that many innocent people to hell. He heard God speak to him and explain that Jesus died for everyone, not just those who believe, and that all humanity are saved and loved by God. And therefore there is no hell where God sends humans to be tortured for eternity. What a blessed relief that must have been for Carlton!

The next Sunday Carlton preached his new gospel of inclusion. To his great surprise, his flock did not share his new found sense of relief and joy. They had just the opposite reaction - people literally started walking out while he was preaching. Over the next several weeks his church shrank quickly. All his associate pastors left as a group and formed a new church in town just a few blocks away.

Carlton was eventually convicted as a heretic by his peers. He had to sell everything. He couldn't pay the mortgage any longer, and his church building was foreclosed upon. Eventually he quit preaching altogether. He knew his new belief

system made more sense, but he couldn't help but think that God was punishing him by taking away his church.

Carlton found his preaching voice again when he was invited to speak at the City of Refuge church in Oakland by Yvette Flunder, the church's founder and a UCC minister. In 2006 Carlton became a UCC minister himself. Today he speaks all over the country, and his following is growing again.

The light we teach about in our education space here has the power to take a powerful televangelist preacher at the top of his game and knock him off his perch, then put his refocused light on a hill for all the world to see.

Sending legacies out into the world

We are now in graduation season, the time when we mark the "sending out" of our young people into the world. This is particularly poignant for me and Heather this year as our firstborn child Danielle will graduate in a few days from the University of Minnesota. In August she will start her life as a "real adult" as she puts it, working for Cognizant as a consultant in data science and analytics.

The kind of "real adult" Danielle will be has been shaped by this place, even though she was only here for her last three years of high school. Here she found acceptance as a new kid moving into a strange town. She found a vibrant youth group and caring adults. She even learned about human sexuality at church! RUCC offered a non-threatening, non-judgmental, "ask me anything" sort of environment very different from the public-school experience. And now she heads out into the world as a more compassionate human than she would have been without RUCC.

Of course Danielle is only one of hundreds of kids who have come through this place and then gone out to shine their light on the world. We have made doctors, engineers and musicians. We have made teachers and artists. And we've even made a few pastors, including the one who left here 30 years ago and who has now returned home to grace this pulpit most of the time. Talk about a legacy!

Building within (closing)

There's one more element to the project, one more way in which we are creating lasting legacy. And that is in the way we are going through this together. We designed the new restrooms. seven times! We found out we have utility lines that run under the footprint of the new building, but we figured out a way to handle that. And we have faced some financial challenges. Probably there are more issues yet to come. May they not be too difficult (knock on wood!)

But we know we can overcome it all, and in the process our connections with each other grow stronger. Some of us have even learned how to be more patient, more tolerant, more accepting, dare I say more Christ-like! Who would have thought that the greatest beneficiaries of the project (at least until now) would actually be we the builders who are growing in our faith and love just by going through the effort.

Matthew wrote, "You are the light of the world." We are the light of the world, the light of acceptance, of love, of radical inclusion. May the legacy of our building project, of us the RUCC family, continue to shine that light in this community long after we're gone.

Amen.

Benediction

Now let us go out into the world with the light of radical inclusion in our hearts. May we all find at least one chance this week to make another person feel more accepted, more loved, more at peace. Amen?
