

“What’s the plan?”
A sermon preached by
Dean L. Francis

²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

It is wonderful to be back together this morning. We’ve had a great summer sharing our stories and hearing from many of our lay leaders in the congregation. But it’s always good to worship together in this beautiful space. You might notice that this morning’s gospel reading was strangely similar to the one that Mollie preached on last week but we figured what the heck, as we are making our way back to the lectionary calendar this fall.

A few years ago in the midst of the 2008 financial collapse, I visited a golf resort in Oregon that had fallen into bankruptcy. The developers had created two beautiful 18-hole golf courses with a massive club house, and their plan was to sell home lots around the courses. Prior to the collapse, 40 or 50 of these homes had been constructed. They were massive structures without much soul. But they were selling like hotcakes, so several builders had purchased more lots and they began to build spec houses in the expectation that there was an infinite market for these homes. Then the collapse occurred, the market dried up, and the builders and investors were left holding the bag. At the time that I visited the property, there were several homes in various stages of completion that had simply been abandoned. Some were just foundations, some had been framed without interior finishing, others were actually complete, but no one had ever purchased or lived in them.

Hindsight always makes us appear more intelligent, so it is easy to look at those houses and say, “What were they thinking? How stupid could they be?” But the reality is that our lives are filled with initiatives that were not planned well. History tells and retells the stories of plans that have gone south. And the journey is frequently one that leaves us with a grocery cart full of unintended consequences. Towers that never happened because the planning wasn’t complete.

Over the summer here at the church we have been physically and spiritually building on plans that will lead and guide us into the future. And our goal has been to thoughtfully plan in a way that doesn't leave us with a half-finished structure.

The physical part of that work is hard to miss, what with all of the scaffolding, lifts, and yellow tape around the building. The masonry, plumbing, roofing, and repair work that we started last spring will likely be completed by the time the first snow falls. And although you won't see a lot of difference in the appearance of the building, it will be in the best condition that it has been in for the past 50 or 60 years. We are doing work that we expect will not have to be repeated in our lifetimes. This is of course due to your generous support of the Re: Capital Campaign (keep those gifts coming!) and the countless hours that our uber project manager, Bill Brown, has given to this work. It is not glamorous work but it is essential to support the ongoing ministry that is taking place here every day.

A less tangible but an equally important part of our ministry this summer has been our work on adopting and implementing our strategic plan. In June, we adopted the plan, which was nearly a year in the making. Last month a group of our congregation's leaders and committee chairs joined our church council to look at our next steps toward growing and sustaining our ministry. Before we identified new initiatives, we worked long and hard as a congregation to articulate the core values that we believed to be essential to our congregation.

Here is how we have articulated our core values. First Church provides...

- Exceptional and engaging worship with strong preaching and outstanding, diverse music.
- A welcoming community that offers hospitality, congregational care, and fellowship.
- An historic, well maintained building that celebrates our heritage and facilitates our ministries into the future.
- Strong, relevant ministries and programs that appeal to families and individuals of all ages.
- Numerous opportunities to support and participate in mission and outreach.
- Active engagement in and advocacy for social justice.
- Extensive faith formation and Christian education opportunities for children, youth, and adults, centered in processes of reflection followed by action that explores identity, call, and vocation.

- Commitment and resources to assist the church and its members to advocate and support the care and stewardship of the earth.

With these foundational understandings, the plan then goes on to articulate a vision for the church's short term future by saying that First Church will:

- ✓ *Cultivate* a diverse, faith-based community that cares for one another, fosters growth, and ensures a strong foundation for present and future needs;
- ✓ *Expand* our welcome to create disciples of Jesus Christ and grow as a faith community;
- ✓ *Provide* an abundance of experiences for all people to learn about God, deepen their faith, and enrich their spiritual lives; and
- ✓ *Connect* with local, national, and global communities through mission-centered advocacy and outreach.

It is this vision that is pushing us forward and I believe that our staff and lay leadership are wholly committed to making this vision a reality. We are on the edge of significant growth here. There are more new initiatives and ministries beginning here this fall than I have seen in the past 20 years and I think we are positioned to be a beacon to the world that is in such need.

So this fall I encourage you to consider taking on one new thing in your spiritual life. Perhaps it is to join a new study or fellowship group, a choir or ensemble, to become a part of our young adult ministry or to help collect and distribute diapers, to repair homes or mentor youth, to feed the hungry or sort rummage. Maybe it is to start a daily prayer practice or to think and act upon your giving. If everyone here did that, just think about what our church could accomplish and what we'd look like next year on Rally Day.

Down on the south side of Chicago at S. Ellis and 46th there stands a building that was once St. James United Methodist Church. It was founded in the 1890's but today it is shuttered, with scaffolding protecting the walkway from a crumbling tower and a "For Sale" sign on the building. It looks eerily similar to our church building for good reason: it was designed by the same architect, First Church member Robert Talmadge.

If you walk through the building as I did several years ago, it is like a mirror image of First Church. The doors and wood moldings are exactly the same, the sanctuary is about the same size and design, and the Indiana limestone that clads the building comes from the same

quarry that produced our limestone exterior. There are lots of reasons why that church closed in 2010, not the least of which was the abandonment of the neighborhood and schools by the Chicago city government in the 1960's. Today that neighborhood is making a comeback, but it is too late for the church.

Now I know that Evanston isn't the equivalent of the south side, but if we don't continue to strive, to grow, and to change to meet the needs of our communities, then we could face a similar fate. Not this year or decade, but it doesn't take much to envision it if you look at some of the other churches in our own neighborhood.

So we keep planning not for institutional survival but so that we might meet the needs of our communities, so that we might reach out to those in our midst who are in such need, and so that we might be a leader for inclusion, hospitality, and justice. Over the long history of our congregation much has been accomplished and today we stand ready to move forward, to recommit ourselves to our mission, and to be the body and the spirit of the risen Christ. This is our task and we are called to continue in our planning and building. Thanks be to God. AMEN.