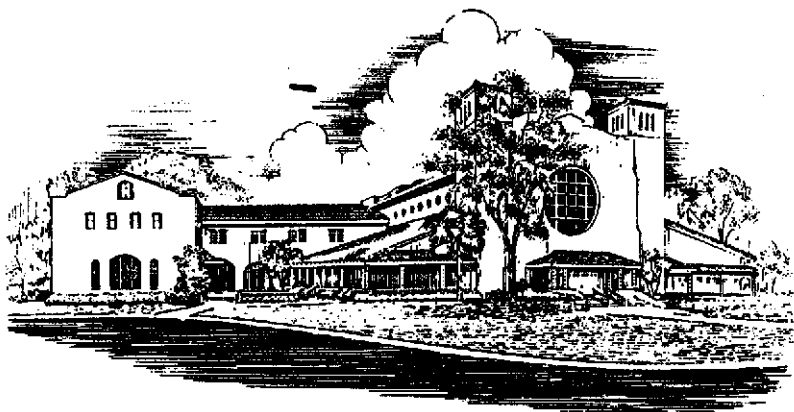


First Church Pulpit

"McCAIG'S FOLLY IS NOT THE ONLY ONE!"

Text: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to complete it, all who see it will mock him . . ."

- Luke 14:28-29



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The first thing you see when you come into Oban is the Dunollie Castle, which guards the north entrance to the Harbor from its lonely crag, while the Dungallon headland protects it to the south. The green hills of Kerrara form a natural harbor bar.

In Oban we come to the setting for this Scottish Sunday sermon. Far above the burgh, dominating the skyline like a colossus, rising from the mountaintop, is an expansive monument, which bears the surname of John McCaig. "McCaig's Folly" is the nickname of this unfinished structure, which was to have been a neo-Roman coliseum. McCaig was a prosperous banker, who knew how to dream. In the recession of the early 1900's, he decided to glorify the city, and to add this pleasant touch of fantasy to the old Victorian town. It was to have housed a huge museum and art galleries and, incidentally, bring earthly immortality to old McCaig.

The problem was, and is, of course, that the gigantic structure was so tremendous an undertaking that, beset with labor troubles, with countless errors and construction difficulties all along the way, it was only partly finished when it had to be abandoned, McCaig having squandered something like, say, a quarter of a million pounds. McCaig's dream, as well as McCaig himself then died, and the fashionable, if unfinished centerpiece became his forever folly. Now, nine decades later, it still stands there, waiting for the masons and joiners to return.

There are some gardens up there inside the unfinished coliseum. It is beautiful to see when floodlit by night. But all of the town's social and cultural activities take place in the concert hall and stage down at the byside in the modern Corran Hall, built superbly in 1965. And McCaig's Folly, so grandiose in design, is but a passing curiosity, and a subject for poets, for preachers, and for tourists to see.

It started out with grand and good intentions. It had a noble cause behind it. But it was left unfinished, and now stands idly by as the century nears its end. Poor old McCaig: his fabulous dream became his folly. I suppose that is a message in itself: "The best laid plans of mice and men go aft astray."

I mean no disrespect to John McCaig. At least he had a dream. And, one further thing of which I am sure... McCaig's Folly is not the only one I know. This whole matter of the unfinished business we leave is near enough the beginning and the ending of our problem. Jesus knew it too. Mocking McCaig and me are the words in Luke, in the fourteenth chapter, where Jesus Christ is speaking: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he had laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying: 'This man began to build, and was not able to complete it.'" Touché...

I like to think it was Jesus Himself leading the laughter. King Herod was known to be a reckless builder, so proud that he sought to dot his empire with towers all over the countryside, guarding every valley, every entrance way. He was so self-important that he wished to show he could build a palace beyond all palaces, towers beyond all towers. It was literally an age of unfinished buildings. Jesus, and all who knew what depth of life can mean, gazed on at his folly.

As He always did, Jesus took what He saw around Him and made it ring with authentic newness. He said our faith is like that, too; the building of a Christian is akin to the erection of a massive tower, or a huge coliseum, or a giant building, like the several we now see rising in Broward County.

Think of the Christian people you know, real bona fide Christian people... how few there are, how few really manage to stand out like a bright shining tower in the middle of it all. Their strength is noticed instantly; trust radiates from their eyes; their love is flowing in every word, dependable, trustworthy and complete. High commitment means hard work, and too few are willing to pay the price!

Most of the rest of us stand around like unfinished towers, like a coliseum halfway up, and the laughter rises all around. Only, Christ is not laughing now... Think of it in the story of the Christianity we embrace,

followers of the Lord, walking in His way. Think of the 2,000 years that the Church has had to accomplish what He asked us to do. What is it that denies us success in bringing the good news to the world? One way in which we could describe our failure would be to say it is like McCaig's old folly. We start out with huge plans... then our selfishness takes over, our lack of spiritual and moral depth, and our drive to succeed in the pleasures of the world.

Do you remember a man named Demas in the Bible? His name appears three times in the New Testament. First, Paul refers to him as a fellow worker with Luke. What high praise! A fellow worker with Paul and Luke, little Demas, hurrah! But as you read on, Paul writes simply that Demas was there, in Colossians. No longer a fellow worker, no longer on a par with Luke, simply that Demas was there... tagging along, I guess Paul meant to say. Finally, Paul writes the third time he mentions him: "Demas forsook me and fled, having loved this present age." No man, having put his hand to the plow (no woman either) and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.

I used to enjoy so very much driving through the wooded countryside around Ligonier, Pennsylvania, in the Laurel Hills. It could be that there is a more beautiful and lovely spot on earth, but I don't know where it is. One of the finest Scottish Highland games in all the nation is held there each September, when the hills are alive.

If you drive southwest of Ligonier, and head over toward Latrobe, the home of Arnold Palmer and Mister Rogers, and then swing out towards Pleasant Unity, you go through a rather ordinary little town (if any town in the Ligonier Valley can be called ordinary) named Baggeley. There I came across, years and years ago, a pleasant little house...red brick, slate roof, nice chimney, front porch, a native-stone paved little walkway leading to the porch. Someone had planned it carefully. A lovely home, set back off the road enough for privacy, but not too far back, so that in winter the walkways could be shoveled without undue duress. Nice house... but there was this funny thing about it, or not so funny maybe... there were no windows and no doors, no electricity ran up to that house, no plumbing was installed. The weeds had grown up around the place by then. The house was well planned, but never finished... Oh, dearie me...

Being inquisitive by nature, and sensing that a sermon was on the way, I asked a friend just down the road, if she knew about what happened. She said: "Oh, sure. This young couple had their dream house in mind when they got married. They laid out the place with care, so that everything would be just right" (dreaming the good dream, you know), "but then," she said, "no one is certain what happened... they had been building the house mainly with their own hands, and a little help from their friends. But, by and by, they began to miss a

weekend now and then, and the work slowed. Finally it stopped, and they did not come back at all. After that," she said, "we heard they had been divorced. No one knows where they are now."

Did you get it? Great plans... great dreams... getting ready to do great things, to share, to give and get, and then, poof... somebody gave up. Somebody got peeved... somebody was offended...somebody settled in.

I see it all the time, don't you? This marvelous thing called marriage, the Christian homes we seek, our refuge from the worries of the world... when it works, it's the finest thing on earth. Burns found that in his Cotter's Saturday Night, when at the end of the working day they all gathered around the hearth. When marriage and family works, love goes on to another generation. When it doesn't, it's worse than if it had never been at all... And, the house stands there by the road, mocking those who abandoned it...who, having great plans, never finished them. McCaig's Folly is not the only one. It is true with churches, too, and social organizations, with companies and corporations, and it is true with people.

I know many who at one time had great dreams and plans for a useful life, a life grounded in the spirit of God... a life which would challenge the best there ever was. But then, they gave up... couldn't keep pace with

themselves. Dreams need to be nourished. Like love, they never end until someone abandons them, takes shortcuts across the field, runs away when the going calls for more, settles in. What could have been a grand and marvelous journey to the stars, ends up on the crowded ash heap. The road to failure, Jesus said, is broad and wide, and those who find it are many. The road to victory is narrow, and those who find it are few. Are you listening?

Now, I would venture to say that there is not a person listening to the sound of my voice who could not stand up for us now and recall a sad chapter in life, where he or she gave up too soon. And there is hardly anyone who does not regret it. Think of the ways in which our text is true. The Bible overflows with the stories of those who persevered: Elijah overcoming his depression... Moses carrying on, even when he knew he would not see the Promised Land... King David recovering from the death of his child, and moving forward to finish what God had required... Isaiah being laughed out of the Kingdom and tiptoeing back to holler once again... Peter returning from the ignominy of his betrayal... Paul, from his memory of Stephen's execution...and there are countless others.

It is the story of John Knox in Scotland, to be sure...(and of all the reformers in every faith in that and every other time), whether in the dungeons of St. Andrew's Castle, or

rowing as a galley slave for eighteen months in France, or being laughed at in the Royal Court at Edinburgh, or being humiliated by his own, there is no earthly reason why Knox should have carried his work to its completion, except... he knew that God was there, except that he had a vision of what this mortal life could be, and the part which the Lord God determined he should play in it.

So now I ask you quietly: what is your folly, my friend? I don't mean any or all of your sins just now; I mean the sin of incompleteness, of something you started with great assurance, being led by God to move ahead, and then for whatever reason, you abandoned it.

We mentioned home and family, and your spiritual life. Or, is it some social project which you undertook? I mean every time I come across firsthand the problem of the poor and disenfranchised in our nation, I say: "I want to do something about it." Every time I hear of hungry people, I want to do something to feed them. Every time I hear of conditions in the prisons, I want to do something to change them. Every time I hear about the problems of the aged, the homeless, of people in trouble who cannot help themselves, I want to help...and I know you do, too. Why don't we do it then? McCaig's Folly lies at the bottom of it all, and the tower for which we failed to count the cost and how to

pay for it in full, and so it was never finished. People die of good intentions. The forces of evil act so swiftly...the forces for good take a long, long time.

A friend of mine used to talk about what he called the "minimum mind-set", getting away with the minimum of what we have to do, just enough to be in, but not enough to be costly... luxuriating in the suburbs of the faith, in but not quite; just enough to be responsible, not enough to be demanding; counting the pennies, but not paying the price. And, the years turn into decades, and someone one day says: "Oh my God, it's almost over now, and I never got around to the building and the deepening of my faith... If someone had only told me," he said, "I wouldn't have done it this way."

"There were so many things
I meant to try,
So many contests I had hoped to
win,
And lo, the end approaches,
Just as I was thinking of
preparing to being."

What is your folly, friend, and what do you intend to do about it? Now would be the time to deepen your commitment. Here would be the time to join the ranks of those whom God has chosen as His own. This would be the moment, this day, this hour, in all the pageantry of what we are doing, to

say in the silence of our soul once more: "Lord God, I need to find a deepening of my faith, a softening of my anger, a renewal of commitment, until I too am sure that that which He began in me will bring it to completion." God is in charge of His world!

Loren Eiseley once wrote an article entitled "The Unfinished Business of Thoreau, i.e. the Walden Experiment", the opening chapter of a new kind of life and one that enthralls us to be sure, but the remaining chapters are missing.

I think it has to do (Eiseley is still speaking) with the fact that Henry Thoreau was a spiritual wanderer through the deserts of our modern world, and we need to follow where his hunches led him to begin. Surely it has to do with nature. Surely it has to do with the quieter things. Surely it has to do with matters of the mind. Surely it has to do with peace, with brotherhood, with blessing. Surely it has to do with our overcoming our disappointment with our fellow men. Surely it has to do with hope. Surely it has to do with vision. Surely it is the unfinished business of being alive and seeking...

And where Thoreau ends, Jesus Christ is just beginning... That's fine, He says. Surely it has to do with all of that...but more... it has to do with what God has done, is doing and will do with me... The unfinished business of Jesus Christ and what He has

commanded for His people and His world... and that is just the beginning... God loved His world and all the people in it.

Martin Luther King could tell us about the unfinished business of being black or white in America... Rene Dubos spoke one day about the unfinished business of being an environmentalist and a true lover of nature... John Holt wrote recently again and again about the business of American education... And Mister Rogers keeps smiling on about the unfinished business of being a human being who can love young and old alike...

God began the work...not you, not I, not he, she, it or they, not we. God began the work. It all falls and fits in accordance with His providential care. And He will finish it, says Paul. The footnote says He will finish the work which He started... Your choice and mine is simple, clear-cut, final: the choice to allow Him to use us to work it to His glory, or to work it for ourselves.

Well, it is time to leave old Oban, and to quit this sermon, too, with one last look at what would have been a marvelous presence in the town. Old John McCaig just left it all unfinished. His Folly, but, one last time, McCaig's Folly is not the only one. For now and evermore. Amen.