

Ken's Dream, Jesus' Plan  
Luke 6:17-26  
NUCC Traditional (Habitat Campaign Announcement)  
17 February 2019

\*PRAY

Houston, Santa Fe, Wharton, Houston and Texarkana. These five communities were home for me between my birth and my graduation from high school. They are each unique towns, and each taught me different things about life, family and values.

As many of you know, I am the son of a United Methodist minister who is now retired. But Dad being transferred by the resident bishop of the Texas Conference is what prompted each of those moves. And whenever Mom and Dad broke the news to us that we would be moving that June, the question never was: "What part of Houston will we live in?" or "Will we be close to our grandparents?" or "How big is the church?" The question was always the same: "What's the parsonage like?"

You see, the United Methodist Church practices the itineracy system where pastors are appointed to churches by bishops with the counsel of their cabinets or district superintendents. To ease this process, many United Methodist congregations still own parsonages where the pastor and their family live. Thankfully, this part of the system has changed, but as I was growing up, it was the same furniture too. The same mattresses, the same couches and the same metallic wallpaper that was quite popular in 1964.

It meant that the pastor and their family preceding us slept on the mattress the night before, took off their sheets, and left at noon. By 3 pm the same day, we arrived, put our sheets on, and slept there beginning that night. It is a foreign system to most, but it was how I lived life. I didn't know it any other way.

I look back on it and think about how it felt to live on other people's furniture and to have a committee walk through the home each year to ensure that we were keeping it "up to standards." I'll tell you a great story sometime about a Christmas Open House one year and the women who re-decorated our family Christmas tree...that's a doozy!

But as I reflect on my childhood and adolescent years, here's what I understand about myself: I learned early that home is literally where I lay my head. Home is where I am surrounded by people who love me. Because we always moved in June and school didn't start until August, often my best friends for a few months were my siblings. I am convinced that is the reason we are so close to this day. Home is where you laugh and catch lightning bugs in the front yard at night and put them in the Mason jar. Home is a place where you don't need a curfew as a child, because your mother steps into the front yard and beckons you home from your neighbor's front yard.

And then, two-and-a-half years ago, I bought my first home. Ironically, because of the parsonage system, I purchased it just three months after my parents, at age 66, bought their **first** home. I remember not sleeping much the night before the closing. I even saved the pen that I used to sign all those documents. I will never forget watching the movers unload my belongings into what was now **my** house. And I will never forget the feeling a few months later when my parents visited for the first time. With immense pride I drove them to the house from the airport and walked them through every nook and cranny.

Home has remained all the things that I previously mentioned, but it has now become so much more. Home is a place of safety, both physical and emotional, during storms. I have sat in the living room of that home and had my heart broken. I have cried

tears at sappy movies, and wondered if I would remain your pastor. I eagerly awaited word, after Irma passed, of whether my home was still standing and what the damage was.

Home is a place that holds memories. I sit at a desk that once belonged to my maternal grandfather and often answer email in the mornings or at night before bed. I am surrounded by pictures of trips that I have taken and people that I have met. I keep a picture at my bedside of myself rocking my oldest niece, Riley, to sleep the day I helped bring her home from the hospital nearly nine years ago.

Home is a place of joy. My home is the place where I play with my chocolate Labrador, Max, where I sit on the lanai sipping wine while I look onto the preserve behind, hoping to catch a glimpse of the bobcat that lives back there. Home is where I eagerly wait to see the butterflies that are drawn to a particular plant in my backyard. It is a place where I welcome groups of prospective new members every other month and tell them about this amazing church, and where I host the monthly Newcomers Gathering once a year and invite the staff over. Home is where I invite friends to watch a movie or swim in the pool, a place where friends from Texas come to visit, and where I putz around in the yard on my day off as if I know what I am doing.

For me, home is many things. More than anything, it provides rootedness for me, and serenity in a busy and noisy world. It is a place that I am eager to go at the end of a long day to refresh my soul and renew my spirit.

**What is home for you?** Is it people or a particular place? Or is it things that bring back memories that transport you to a different time and place?

Perhaps, for many of us, home is an idea that brings a mixture of emotions. Home may be the place where you said a final goodbye to parents or to a spouse, or where one day your child took their first step and then, what seemed like the very next day, was stepping into the world on their own. Perhaps it was the place where you were when the doctor called and said: "I need you to sit down, I have difficult news." Or maybe you remember exactly where you were in your home when you were told that you were going to be a grandparent for the first time.

I know that's one of the things that Ken Bruce loved most about Habitat for Humanity. He had seen it firsthand with the Morales family. He and Nancy had become sponsors to them, helping them begin to make the shift from a succession of rentals to home ownership. Initially, even with a language barrier, Ken and Nancy invited the Morales family with their four children over for cookouts and afternoon swims. I met the Morales family at Ken's memorial service a few years ago. Little did I know what was already in motion.

You see, Ken and Nancy were among the first to commit to the renewed endowment effort that began before I arrived as your Associate Minister. Dave Stevenson and my predecessor, Ron Patterson, met with Ken, who talked about his deep desire to, at the time of his death, leave a gift to the church and a gift to Habitat for Humanity-Collier. Ken arranged to leave \$25,000 with the great hope that this church would match it. He physically gave the gift to the church but designated it to Habitat.

When I was informed of this, I immediately called two people: my friend Lisa Lefkow, the CEO of Habitat-Collier, and Nancy Bruce, Ken's widow, also a dear friend. I

could tell you more about those conversations, but instead, I want to invite Nancy and Lisa forward to visit with me for a few moments:

**Lisa Lefkow and Nancy Bruce come to center of chancel from reserved pew in front of Lectern. Dawson hands Nancy held-hand microphone.**

**(1) What do you appreciate most about Habitat-Collier? (after answering, Nancy hands microphone to Lisa)**

**(2) Lisa, what is your first memory of Ken? (after answering, Lisa hands microphone back to Nancy)**

**(3) Nancy, what was Ken's hope for this gift? (after answering, Nancy hands microphone to Dawson and Lisa and Nancy return to seats)**

Ken and Nancy Bruce were some of the first people I met when I moved to Naples over five years ago. Along with Jo Armstrong, they hosted the Christmas party at Bentley Village that year. I remember Ken's big smile and gregarious laugh. I remember his Yale memorabilia and his joy when talking about his grandchildren.

What I would later learn about was Ken's deep love for Habitat for Humanity. Ken didn't just donate to Habitat, Ken actually built Habitat houses...a lot of them. In fact, at lunch last Thursday, Nancy gave me the pair of gloves that Ken wore when he was on the jobsite. They will be a reminder to me, and to all of us, not only of this campaign, but of what Jesus was talking about in this morning's scripture reading known as "The Sermon on the Plain."

This text immediately follows Jesus' selection of the twelve. It is their first opportunity to observe and listen to Jesus committing to follow him.

Returning from the mountaintop (Luke's traditional choice for retreats of prayer and meditation), Jesus and his disciples now come down to "a level place." While all three of the synoptic gospels record their own versions of the following events, they all

locate the participants in very different geographical areas - the mountains for Matthew, the sea for Mark, and the plain (the "level place") for Luke

But what struck me about this is that it seems to be a "leveling place" as well as a level place, a place where Jesus states that life on earth is not economically equal for everyone, but that, in the life after this one, God will work it all out.

And so, I believe that Jesus provided the plan, and Ken Bruce has provided a dream. We don't believe in small dreams here at Naples United Church of Christ. We believe that God is calling us to make a significant impact. We believe that we can receive Ken's gift of \$25,000 and match it 10 times for a total gift to Habitat of \$250,000 to be given to them on Easter Sunday, April 21 of this year.

The dream is that five families in Collier County, specifically the Immokalee area, will be able to have affordable housing through our partnership with Habitat for Humanity and our realization of the dream of Ken Bruce.

Ken's gift of \$25,000 has been matched by our Endowment for a total of \$50,000. A generous donor has matched **that** amount with a gift of \$50,000, for a beginning sum of \$100,000, so two of the five houses are already funded. That leaves us with \$150,000 more to raise by Easter. You will find envelopes in your pews, information in your bulletin, the Board of Mission and Outreach at a table in the Gathering Place today, and, I assure you, you'll be hearing more in the coming weeks as well.

The idea of home is something that levels us all. Whether your home is large and opulent or small and modest, most of us know the feeling of being able to call something "our home." Naples United Church of Christ, you are my home. You were Ken Bruce's home. And so I invite you to join me alongside Habitat, remembering our

heritage as one of their four founding faith communities 41 years ago, in helping five families achieve their dream of having a home of their own, with dignity.