

November 2, 2025

21st Sunday after Pentecost*“Hope is what we do”*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Matthew 7:12-13, 24-27

Twenty years ago, our congregation began a process to build a columbarium and memorial garden on our grounds. Members wanted to create a place to lay their loved ones to rest in a setting that was close to their hearts. Now, just outside these windows, is the columbarium where saints of the church have their final resting place, and where families can go to remember and to give thanks.

Fifteen years ago, the church stopped sending the Chancel Choir to the bowels of the church for rehearsals and moved the music staff offices upstairs. What had been the Cornell Lounge on the main floor became a modern and refreshed space for singing and music. Just a few years later, the church undertook not just a renovation of the organ, which was being held together by duct tape in places, but the installation of a completely new instrument. The Centennial Organ was a celebrated project, which many of you generously supported, and was installed just ahead of the church's centennial anniversary in 2014.

In 2019, at the prompting of a youth member in the church, the Little Free Pantry was installed outside our building. You have since rallied behind it, generously donating to keep it stocked with food during the pandemic, in everyday times, and now once again, as food assistance benefits run out during the government shutdown.

In early 2020, the Session agreed to remove pews and resituate our sanctuary to accommodate the new fangled idea of a Playground for children. Despite worries about noise and distraction during worship, the project went ahead. At the time, there were just a handful of children in the congregation to use it. But now, who among us can even imagine this sanctuary without that lively and joyful space, bursting at the seams with kids?!

This congregation has come together time and again to create something new. Each time we build together, it is because we are filled with hope.

Not hope in ourselves, but hope in what God is doing among us. Each of those projects I highlighted was a ministry. Each one was a witness to Christ's love and a way to live our faith as we seek to serve. Those building projects have allowed us to worship God more fully, to welcome more people into faith, and to serve neighbors' needs that might otherwise go unmet. As people of faith, when we build something, it is almost always because we are filled with hope. That's true in the church and it's true in our lives—whether we build a business, a house, or a new daily habit. We are not assured of a particular outcome. Sometimes, it's not even clear that it will be possible to meet our goal. But we have hope—a sense of possibility, a trust in God's goodness, and a sense that we are participating in something meaningful.

Jesus spoke of a wise person who built his house on rock. That man, too, must have been filled with hope when he set out to build his house. He had hope for a home. A hope for his life and family to endure. A hope for shelter from storms. Maybe like me, you can't help but think of the three little pigs when you hear Jesus' story. The key issue in that tale was the building material—straw, sticks, or brick—rather than the foundation of sand or rock. But the outcome was similar. The rain fell, the floods came, the wind blew; or the wolf huffed and he puffed, and only the buildings that were firmly built remained standing.

During October, many in the congregation read the book *Hope: A User's Manual* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana. We talked a lot about how hope is more than a feeling or a wish. The one who built his house on sand, or the pigs who used straw and sticks, were maybe just optimistic and wishful that their houses would stand. But the ones who were filled with hope took action toward the end result they envisioned. They built on rock and with bricks to create a sturdy, enduring house. As McKibben Dana writes, "hope is wrapped up in what we make real. Hope isn't what we think. Hope isn't what we feel. Hope isn't even what we imagine is possible. Hope is what we *do* in the face of suffering, pain, and injustice. Hope is what we do in the face of depression's dull weight or grief's harsh sting."¹ Hope becomes real when we act faithfully. We build hope when we help a neighbor rake their leaves or offer a ride to a doctor visit. We kindle hope when we work toward causes that bring justice and thriving for all God's people. We live in hope when we volunteer and connect with neighbors and take tiny steps toward wholeness. And when we literally build something together, we enact the hope that God has already stirred among us.

Today we are thinking about building hope and we are launching our capital campaign of the same name. The chairperson of our campaign team,

Kevin Ball, will share his own story of hope in a moment and you can learn more about the projects the campaign will fund at today's lunch. Hope is *what we do*; hope is taking action, building things. Hope is also what we do; as in, hope is our line of work. As Christians and in this congregation, hope is our vocation; it's what we are all about.

With that in mind, most of the projects in this campaign are renovations and changes to our building that will increase and ensure access for all God's people. We want to be sure people who use walkers or strollers, scooters or wheelchairs have an up-to-date elevator to join us for coffee hour, go to Sunday school or visit the Backyard Playroom. We want to offer a more accessible restroom right outside the sanctuary, which many of us have needed. These are not glamorous projects; they are hopeful ones built on rock. They are actions we're taking that remind us of our commitment to creating a space that includes all people, serves their needs, and invites them in. Just like the legacy of the building projects we have done before. It's my hope that you will join me, and our campaign team, and those who have already pledged, in making a commitment of your own to this hopeful vision. Because that kind of hope and welcome for all is what we do; it's what we're all about.

When you come forward for communion today, after you are served, you will walk by the big baskets of colorful blocks. We want each of you to pick up one block and take it back to your pew with you. Then after the service, everyone is invited to bring your block downstairs to Kirkman Fellowship Hall where you can help us build a creative structure together. The children will get us started. Who knows what it may look like when it's done?! Probably it will look more imaginative than soundly built! But no matter what it looks like, I am confident that the house, and the lives we are building together are all built on rock. Because we are building on the solid foundation of trust in God's presence with us through good times, and through rain and floods and wind.

Jesus said that to hear his words and to *act* on them is to be like the wise man who built his house on rock. We are called to follow Jesus' path of discipleship, narrow though it may be, in a world filled with noise and distraction. Whether you *feel* hopeful or not right now, the call to us is to hear Jesus' invitation and then to act, to build, to do. And in doing that together, we will build hope here and for our community. And we will build on the hope that God has already given us in Jesus Christ.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2022) 39.