



Building Houses That Don't Fall Down

Opening Convocation, Phil Eaton, President

Seattle Pacific University

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Let me offer my words of welcome as we begin the 2002-2003 year at Seattle Pacific University. I trust the new students all survived the flurry of activities for orientation. The staff survived as well. The faculty are ready to open their classes. The returning students are all settled in. Lots of people already have their first assignments and can't believe it: you mean we have to read all of that before Friday? It's now time to buckle up and buckle down.

Faculty, staff, returning students, new students—we are it. This is the team. We are the SPU community. Lot's of people looking in on us—but we are the core community. And so I say welcome to all of you—my friends, my colleagues, our wonderful students (and all of the colonels all over this room).

Well, I think of all the anticipation in this room this morning: all of the hopes and the dreams, the fears and the expectations. And then I ask myself—so what gives all of this focus? What drives our energies to do all of this? Why are we here, doing what we are doing?

Sometimes I get very tired. Sometimes the long hours and the tugs on me from so many directions just wear me out. At those times I have to dig down deep and ask, so what's it all about? I have to dig down deep to find the bed-rock foundations, the big purpose, that help to make sense of it all.

I want to talk this morning about building houses. Most of all I want to talk about building on strong foundations. Building a life is a huge venture, and if we don't think very carefully about the foundations, that life will come crashing down. Building a premier Christian university is a big deal, and if it isn't anchored on something rock-solid, it isn't going to last, or at least its impact will not be lasting.

My text for this morning is from Matthew 7. It is a very familiar passage, but it is a wonderful metaphor for building lives and building universities. Jesus says, "So whoever hears these words of mine and acts on them is like a man who had the sense to build his house on rock. The rain came down, the floods rose, the winds blew and beat upon that house; but it did not fall, because its foundations were on rock. And whoever hears these words of mine and does not act on them is like a man who was foolish enough to build his house on sand. The rain came down, the floods rose, the winds blew and battered against that house; and it fell with a great crash."

So how do we know if we are building on rock or building on sand? The rains will come and the floods will rise and the winds will blow no matter which house we build. The key is to think about foundations. The key is to search for rock on which to build.

I had a professor in college who is one of the most important influences in my life.

This is the man who was the first to open up for me the world of Shakespeare and Milton and Homer and John Donne and George Herbert. He's the one who first showed me that a text has many layers and that the unpeeling of those layers is a wonderful journey. He taught me that a text is a story, and that each story is part of a bigger story. His name was Clem Simpson. He was always Dr. Simpson to me. He had completely lost the use of one of his legs to childhood polio. He was masterful with his crutches; his shoulders were massive. And his mind was agile and fresh, his imagination lively and surprising. He always felt old and wise to me. I loved this man, and I respected him so

much. Anything he said was true.

He told a story one time that has become hugely important to me over time. He was a young professor at Wheaton at that time, and he faced a kind of challenge of faith. He was being asked to say what he believed, and this was a big deal to him.

And so he went to the Newberry library in Chicago one day, determined not to emerge until he had written down everything he believed. He took out a notebook and he wrote and thought and wrote. He scratched things out. He continued on into the evening and then into the night, until finally he felt he had it down.

And then he said something very interesting. He said he ended up with just a small paragraph. Big notebook, but just a small paragraph. All of the thinking, and all of the learning, and all of the writing boiled down to a small paragraph. These were the things that mattered. There was a lot left out, he said, because he determined what was foundational and what was not. This was the rock-like foundation.

Constantly, throughout my life, I have had an impulse, maybe you could call it an obsession, to boil it all down to the essentials. I love complexity and I love ambiguity. My academic training is a celebration of ambiguity. But I also love the clarity and simplicity and certainty of foundations.

To all of my Wesleyan friends, I know this is a very Reformed thing to do. I must be part Reformed. I fully understand that whatever we get down in the notebook is worthless unless we live it out.

But this impulse must be why I care so much about vision. I want to say: here are the essentials. This is the guiding purpose. Let's debate and discuss and wrestle with lots of things. That's as it should be for a university. But then let's anchor our debates and our differences on some rock-like center.

Now I don't intend to write a faith statement here this morning. That's not my intention at all. But I became very intrigued this summer thinking about this text on building houses that stand. There is lots of sand around on which we can build our houses. And the question for me and for this university is how we can make sure we are finding the rock?

When I first became president at Seattle Pacific, I began to say that "we will ground everything we do on the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ." The word ground implies foundation, a bed-rock on which we would build, a center. I fully recognized the diversity of Christian traditions represented in this community—and I marvel at that diversity and celebrate it wholeheartedly. But we have to have a starting point, and somehow this was a beginning.

I knew a president one time from another college who refused to use this kind of language. He never wanted to talk too much about the Christian stance of the institution for fear of offending someone. And I thought what a mistake. And the college floundered for a time because there was no ground point, no anchor. And I was determined that this would not be the case at SPU.

And then early on I began to tell a story that seemed foundational to me, foundational for who I am as a leader and foundational for what I thought we are called to do as a university. It is the story of David and Goliath. I told the story over and over, and I know the stance in this story is complicated and it made some people anxious. But this story seemed very important for our moment in time.

Let me tell you why I think this story is important. I felt Seattle Pacific had developed over time a sense of being on the margins. I came here because I noticed the enormous quality of the people and a tremendous opportunity to flourish. I came here with a profound sense that the world was in desperate need, but I knew not much was going to

happen sitting on the margins, with a margin-like posture. We seemed a little defensive and embattled, a little afraid to speak out, a bit afraid to be noticed, just slightly embarrassed.

I was actually told by someone early on not to be too aggressive. That it was best to stand on the margins. Don't be too bold. Don't be too competitive. Let the world discover who you are. Don't shine the light too brightly.

And for me this was nonsense. You will recall in the story of David that the Israelites were facing ethnic cleansing by the Philistines. There was tremendous fear that they would be annihilated, certainly marginalized, rendered irrelevant. And David steps in and says, "you know we've got to run right at the giant. That's the only way we're going to make a difference. That's the only posture. I am convinced that God will go with us."

And then he said something terrific. He said we will run at the giants so that the world will know there is a God. We don't run at the giant just to be aggressive or combative. No, we run out there in order to change the world, so that the world will know God's plan of grace and love for his children.

This David story stirred me. I felt we had to make a move. I felt our community and the world was calling on us to make a difference, and I felt we were isolated on the margins.

I do indeed believe we need to run at the giants. I think of the giants of indifference and hostility to the gospel. I think of the giants that seek to move us to the margins. I think of the powerful degrading forces of poverty and racism. Those are giants we need to destroy. I think of the prospects of war and conflict and terrorism. Those too are giants of our day. We need to run at these giants so that peace and reconciliation and justice and opportunity and health and safety may be available for all of God's children.

So there is surely something right about this posture for me and for this great university. But I have been thinking a lot lately that you can run at the giants in all the wrong ways. I worry a lot when we turn confrontive and strident and mean-spirited in trying to carry out the task. I love the boldness of this story, and its sense of urgency, and its sense of opportunity, but there has to be something more to our posture.

Let's go back to the Matthew passage. Jesus says build your house on my teachings. What teachings are we talking about? Well, he has just finished giving the Sermon on the Mount, and so we go back to those teachings.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the sorrowful, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail. Blessed are those who show mercy, those whose hearts are pure. Blessed are the peacemakers, the persecuted."

If we are going to run right at the giants, so that the world will know there is a God, and if we are going to do this grounding ourselves on the gospel of Jesus Christ, we better do it in a certain way, with a certain spirit, with a certain kind of transformed heart.

The law says don't murder. Jesus says get hold of your anger.

"Be careful not to parade your religion before others."

"Set your mind on God's kingdom, here on earth as it is in heaven, and focus on his justice, and all the rest will come to you as well."

And "don't be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own."

"Always treat others as you would like them to treat you."

These teachings make me want to cry out, "Lord, as I run right at the giants, keep me from arrogance, help me to be gentle, help me always to show mercy, help me to learn from those who are poor in spirit, help me to be a peacemaker, help me to be very careful with power, help me to keep my mind focused on your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven."

I went to the funeral of Don Mortenson's mother on Saturday. There were some stories told about Don's mom that reminded me so much of my mom. My mom died a year ago. In the last few years of her life she had lost a real grasp of what was going on around her. She barely remembered me. But very often when we would come to see her in the nursing home, she would immediately invite us to dinner, and she would say she would be right back, that she was going to fix something to eat.

She had lost her mind but not her heart. To the end she wanted to serve, to bring comfort. To the end she wanted others to flourish. And I thought "blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the sorrowful, the gentle. . . . Blessed are those whose hearts are pure." When the rains come, these are the things that will last.

I know I am a driver and a builder. I am impatient with the world, and I want to change it. I am going to run right at the giants, and I know you will too.

But I hope I go our there with a gentle heart. I hope my real aim is so that others might flourish. Lord keep me from arrogance. Lord teach me not to be too impatient. Lord help me to bring peace.

Well, those are my thoughts on building a life on rock. God bless each one of you as we begin this new year.

