

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 16, 2011
Sermon Title: My Habitat for Humanity: The (Mostly)
Good Old Days
Scripture: James 2:14-18
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Introduction:

Today, the day I've been looking forward to for ages, is the official launch of my new book called *My Habitat For Humanity: the (Mostly) Good Old Days*. I began it in the nursing home 21 months ago, recovering from my double knee replacement surgery. Forced inactivity gave me the time, and pain meds put me in the mood. Now you get to see if I use that time wisely! There are copies in the narthex and the Memorial Room during coffee hour. And in the office during the week.

Today I begin a two-part sermon, today and on October 30, a chance to tell you the story of *My Habitat for Humanity*, the journey, the lessons learned along the way, the greatness of mission, the weakness of people (me included), the power of faith.

I've said to folks about my story, "It took 16 years to live it, 22 to get over it, two to write it, and now I'm rejoicing in it." I hope you can, too. A brief intro to my sermon: for 14 years, I had the most fun in the world working with Habitat for Humanity. Habitat is a Christian ministry that builds houses with the poor all over the world. It was started by Millard Fuller, a dear friend of mine, a self-made millionaire from Alabama. His idea was beautifully simple: give poor people the chance to build their own house, working alongside volunteers from churches, creating a partnership to keep the costs down and giving the poor at chance to own their own home.

I got involved in 1977. Habitat had built one house in Texas and half a house in Georgia. They had a tiny budget and no staff. But I loved it! Their vision, their boldness, their faith-driven spiritual sass were just what I believed the Christian church needed. Habitat was a breath of fresh air, a "new frontier in Christian mission," we called ourselves. So I jumped on board. Before I knew it, I was president. We were going to eliminate poverty housing from

the face of the earth ... and then tackle something else. Millard Fuller actually said that, and we believed it. And we started doing it.

My experiences took me off to Africa, down to Latin America, the Caribbean, Haiti, India – in the midst of revolutions and terrorists, meeting with presidents and chiefs and generals and dictators, crisscrossing the United States. And along the way, we picked up Jimmy Carter, Paul Newman, Andrew Young, Jack Kemp. People like Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich showed up at our worksites. Miss America got involved. The NFL, Oprah; Presidents Bush and Reagan gave us awards.

I got to speak at Harvard, Princeton, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, Riverside Church, Marble Collegiate Church. And despite my well-known lack of talent, I found myself actually building houses! I was mixing cement, laying brick, digging foundations, pouring concrete all over the world. Those were good times.

Then one day it all came crashing down. We discovered that Habitat's founder, my friend Millard Fuller, had been sexually harassing female staff and volunteers. I met with him privately to try to help him and to save Habitat. When the dust settled, I was fired. Millard told the press I was fired "for being a defender of women." I was broken, blackballed, smeared. It was the end of a lot for me, *a lot*, and it took a long time to recover. You helped that to happen. This church, my church, *you* put me on the path to forgiveness and healing ... and memories

Finally, I was able to remember "The Good Old Days" to remember how great Habitat is, how great it is to dream BIG and believe BIG and do BIG. All right, time to close this non-commercial ... with a commercial. As you know, a few weeks ago I was a guest preacher down in Greensboro, North Carolina. I was preaching at the church of Julie and Paul Peebles, the couple who married us in January. But they were also the Habitat chaplains who first learned about the sexual misconduct of Millard Fuller. As the chaplains, they were the people to whom the women turned. They were fired, too. My book is actually dedicated to them, their courage, their sacrifice, their faith.

While down there I was put up at the luxurious old-fashioned O. Henry Hotel, named after O. Henry, the great writer. There are free "Oh, Henry!" candy bars everywhere. And on the nightstands are free copies of O. Henry's stories, like "The Gift of the Magi."

My last night in Greensboro I once again sat in their lovely lobby, actually working on this sermon. There were several young kids there, rambunctious, running around, jumping on the couches, having a ball. They'd escaped a

wedding reception in the ballroom, and I guess I was their chaperone. One of the kids, 7 or 8 years old, comes up to me, he says, "Mister, what are you doing?" So I tell him I just finished writing a book and now I have to figure out how to sell it. Well he runs off to play then after a while he comes back. He leans over my shoulder and says, "Mister, are you O. Henry?" Well, I'm not O. Henry, the main difference being he is dead and I'm not; but he's sold more books than I have. Today you have the chance to close that gap.

James 2:14-18

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men," and people did! They left behind everything to go his way, do his thing. Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but I've got nothing like that, just follow me," and people did. They caught his energy, his vision, and followed him. Jesus even said, "Pick up your cross and follow me," a warning if ever there was one, and still, people said, "O.K., fine, we'll do it! We like your spirit, we like your passion, let's do it together."

Passion. Vision. Oomph. Spirit. I know a thing or two about that. It's what got me into Habitat for Humanity in the first place; it's what got me excited and committed to Habitat; it's what took me across America and around the world, starting Habitat projects, building houses; it's what led me to leadership in Habitat, being on the board and president for 13 years, as Habitat was one of the great mission projects of our world and our time.

Passion. Vision. Oomph. Spirit. It's also what put me on the path to disaster, discovering the sexual misconduct of Habitat's founder, trying to help him, trying to protect the mission. It got me fired, blackballed, it sent me into a dizzying spiral of bitterness, betrayal, discouragement, and a whole lot of soul-searching.

Passion. Vision. Oomph. Spirit. That's also what put me back on my feet, got me here to Greenfield Hill Church, and helped me to write my book.

Passion. Vision. That's what hooked me from the beginning. The Bible says, "People without a vision perish," and Habitat came along at just the right time, in American life and in my own life. I was a young pastor at the time, and Habitat came along at a time when I wanted to believe that Christianity in general, that Christians themselves, that churches in particular could be more amazing, more astounding, more impactful than we ever imagined!

You see, in the 60s we got the "God is Dead" theology. Newspapers and magazines and comedians all wrote obituaries for God. God was dead. Done. Over. Finito. Passé. Irrelevant. God didn't matter. Christians didn't matter. Churches didn't matter. But in the 70s, Habitat came along and proclaimed, "You ain't seen nothing yet! Wait till you see what we do with God, for God, because of God; wait till you see what we do directed by God, in honor of God. Watch our worship ... and our service. Watch our faith ... and our action. Watch us 'hear the word'... then 'do it.'"

We were bold and brassy and arrogant, quite determined to change the world, save the world, and spruce up the world at the same time. Goodbye tenements and slums and shacks; goodbye to dead churches, dead Christians, and dead God. Habitat for Humanity was going to rock the world, change the world, save the world. We believed that. I believed that.

In the last two years and the last two weeks, America has seen two movements capture the attention of the public: the Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street protesters. Both groups got started by being angry. Maybe at government. Maybe at business. Maybe it's spending. Maybe at war. But they were angry. Both want to take America back from whomever they think took it away. Both believe America can be better or used to be better. Both have passion, oomph, and spirit. And anger.

Habitat didn't have anger. We had the youthful enthusiasm. We had the sense that we weren't going to wait around for government to do it. We were wonderfully naïve and fearless and optimistic. And, we had God.

If you had met me in 1977, 1983, 1988, 1991, I would have looked you right in the eye, and I would have told you flat out: we are going to change the world. Habitat was deeply immersed in faith. It wasn't some add-on or a handy device to hook in religious people. We were propelled by faith, fueled by faith. It was our reason for existence, it was our core.

Our Bible study this fall is of the Letter of James, the same place we got our morning Scripture from. James said, "Faith without works is dead. What good is it if a person claims to have faith but no good deeds? Suppose someone has no clothes or no food. What do you do? Do you go up to that person and say, 'Good luck, stay warm, eat well ... somehow? I'm thinking of you, I'm praying for you. God bless you!' What good is it? Faith without works is dead, silly, foolish, empty, wasted, useless."

Jesus thought the same way. He tied our very salvation to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely. "Doing unto the least of these as if doing unto him," looking for that basic, human, urgent need and finding a simple, practical solution. Jesus even identified his own purpose, his own mission with the same priority. "I have come to preach Good News to the poor," Jesus said. Habitat just put all that together: preaching and doing, Good News and faith in action. All leading to "a simple decent house for God's people in need." That was one of our first slogans: "A simple decent house for God's people in need."

It was thanks to Habitat that I met my Indian friend Azariah. I went to India to scout out the best place to start Habitat's first project in Asia and, thank God, God led me to Azariah. And he had his own slogan: "See a need, meet a need."

Millard and Azariah were right. It's pretty simple stuff. Pretty basic. Pretty true to Jesus and James. Habitat took a pretty basic human need, housing, and turned it into a ministry, a movement, a mission. In America we call "owning your own home" the American dream. In the last couple of years we've seen that housing is central to the American economy. When houses aren't selling, potential homeowners aren't buying, banks aren't lending, builders aren't building, we're all in trouble. The American dream is at the heart of the American economy.

Of course, the American dream is pretty universal. As Millard often said, all human beings share one trait in common: at night we all want to sleep. And we'd all like to sleep in a place that is safe, nice, clean, dry. No dusty dirt floors in the dry season. No mud floors in the rainy season. No scorpions and snakes falling down on your head from the thatched roof. No leaks and rats. People just want to go to sleep "snug as a bug in a rug" in their own house.

But Habitat didn't stop there. There's an old saying, "A house is not a home," and we always knew that we were about much more than bricks and mortar. I always said that some day when somebody writes the definitive history of Habitat, he or she will say that the house itself was the least important part of the Habitat story. When all is said and done, the real

miracles are the people. The walls broken down are more important than the walls built up.

All over the world, including our beloved country, walls came tumbling down, thanks to Habitat. Ancient walls of tribal hostility, racial, ethnic, and religious hatred, caste and class divisions, rich and poor, up and down, strong and weak; centuries of violence, oppression, slavery, and evil ... all torn down. Suddenly, bitter enemies of historic proportion are working side by side, digging a foundation, putting up a roof, painting a child's bedroom.

I can't tell you all my good stories because I need you to buy my book, but I'll tell you one because it happened right here. Some of you saw it. It was probably eight or nine years ago, we had a Habitat Sunday in the summer, and we invited some Habitat staff to come and bring a family with them.

During the introductions, the dad of the family stood up here by the altar, looked out over the congregation, and said, "I recognize some of you. I pave driveways, and I paved some of your driveways. I didn't know when I was paving your driveway, you were helping to build a house for my family."

That's sort of Habitat in a nutshell. My guess is that just about everybody has pre-judgments about others. I bet folks who pave driveways have some pre-judgments about us, and we have some pre-judgments about folks who pave driveways. But for one hour, one Sunday, we were all on the same team, in the same church, with the same mission. A little touch of heaven multiplied a zillion times around the world, Habitat is like a 21st-century, modern-day barn raising, everybody pitching in to help a neighbor. It is incredibly cool!

I'd like to tell you how much I sacrificed for Habitat, how much I did, how much I gave, how hard I worked, but forget that! The truth is I had a ball! It was great, wonderful, exhilarating, and oh, so much fun. For 14 years I saw Christianity at its best, America at its best, church at its best, volunteerism and mission at their best.

And one day it all came crashing down on my head. All of these "bests," all the wonders and miracles were ripped apart. Hopes were dashed, careers destroyed, promises broken, even faith was mocked and manipulated. Imagine what it is like to work in a Christian ministry, and day after day people are called into the big office and fired, marched to the front door and expelled, just for believing that women shouldn't be treated like meat. To be stabbed in the back repeatedly and when you look over your shoulder, the people with the knives are the folks you loved, trusted, believed in.

That awfulness, that hurt is *not* the center of my book, nor is this sermon. But it is a part of my life, what makes me and shakes me, and warps me, I'm sure.

In my next sermon on October 30, I'll lay out some lessons I've learned about forgiveness, recovery, moving on; about mission: what works, what doesn't; about faith and love and what gets you through whatever life throws at you. And the #1 lesson? I'll give you a preview: don't take 20 years to get over it. If you gave so much of yourself to something that it hurts when it's over, there must have been a lot of good there worth remembering, worth honoring, worth enjoying. For me, with Habitat, I've been remembering the faith and the love.

Jesus once said to his followers, "If you follow me, you're going to end up in all sorts of situations, but don't worry, I'll help you speak." Well, we did end up in all sorts of situations, and he did help us speak. We ended up in places where blacks and whites had nothing to do with each other, where the rich and the homeless had nothing to do with each other, where light-skinned Haitians and dark-skinned Haitians, Spanish-descended Peruvians and Indian-descended Peruvians had nothing to do with each other, where Christians and Hindus, where evangelical Christians and liberal Christians had nothing to do with each other, where people from one side of town or the other side of the tracks or just across the river had nothing to do with folks on this side.

We stood before all of them, on both sides of the tracks, and every time, God gave us the spirit to tell a simple story of God's love. God loves you. God loves me. And God wants our lives to be the best they can be. And working together we can make life a little bit better. For me, for you, for the folks over there, off on the other side.

My book is my 12th book, and a friend suggested that the things that keep me from being famous are my boring book titles! I'll agree. One of the best book titles has already been taken. Millard Fuller's second book was titled *Love in the Mortar Joints*, a simple title that goes right to the heart of Habitat. More than housing, more than social justice, more than charity or doing good, Habitat challenged Christians to live out the central teaching of Jesus Christ: love. "Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love one another. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do unto the least as you would do unto me. For God is love." All these phrases stolen straight from the Bible. All those phrases, the job description of what we tried to do.

The best moments were always those when you turned over the house to the family that had worked with you to build it. Usually every house dedication is a big celebration: speeches, music, prayer, gifts, food, ribbon-cutting. And then there's that moment where mom or dad takes hold of the house keys for the first time and looks out at all the Habitat people, the volunteers, the staff, the neighbors, the donors, and they say, "Welcome to MY house." And they all say, "MY house" really big, really loud. Because they helped build and pay for it, they poured their heart and sweat into it.

A couple of weeks ago I drove over to Bridgeport to the local Habitat headquarters to present a few gift copies of my book to the Habitat staff. I was nervous because my book does bring Millard Fuller down a notch or two.

I still meet people who, when they hear I was with Habitat, they just swoon, "Oh, did you ever meet Millard Fuller? You are a soooo lucky." So I was a little nervous bringing *My Habitat* book to real Habitat people! A few hours later Mr. Berzin called to thank me. He was very gracious and inspiring, and when he started to talk about the best part of Habitat for him, lo and behold, he started talking about that same moment you turn over the house to the family. "There's nothing like it," he said, *there's nothing like it*.

In closing, I'll tell you a little story about some really big people. I was invited to speak in Cazenovia, New York, a tiny town outside of Syracuse. They were dedicating their very first Habitat house. The family members were refugees from the Vietnam War. They'd lost everything in that war – freedom, friends, family – but they escaped to America to begin a new life. They were all excited to be chosen to receive a Habitat house, and they all showed up the very first workday to help out, to put in their volunteer sweat equity hours to speed up the construction. That first day the big item was to dig the foundation, but the backhoe never arrived. So the family opened up the bag they brought of food for the workday, and each one, from the oldest parents to the youngest child, each one grabbed a knife or a fork, a spoon or a plate, kitchen utensils, anything they could find, and started digging the foundation by hand.

Just another little slice of heaven.