

Title: Celebration Sunday

Text: Various

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All of us no matter how our age or background, carry a storehouse of memories with us. Buried deep in our subconscious are millions of experiences that we revisit like instant replays. Some memories are good and life-giving and we revisit them often. Memories of our wedding day, or the birth of our first child or the day we graduated or first played in the snow

Other memories are traumatic and we would do anything to erase them from our minds, never to recall them again.

Albert Schweitzer has said that:

Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory.
(Albert Schweitzer)

I was reading during the week of honeymoon couples who probably wish they were able to wipe their memory banks clean.

You can look up these stories at a web site called www.honeymoondisasters.com. I kid you not. Here are a couple of examples.

On their way to Nevada, Paul and Leah Lusk of Sugar City, Idaho, flipped their car into floodwaters. When they emerged, Paul, who had hit his head, couldn't remember the accident, recognize his bride, or recall he'd just been married.

Mae and Kyle of Richmond, Virginia, were forced to listen to the comedian on their cruise ship joke about the Titanic movie. Then the couple awoke to the horrible sound of crunching metal and the captain's order to abandon ship. Their lifeboat made it to shore in St. Maarten, where the cruise line put them up at a nudist colony.

There is a strange little side-story that is part of the Exodus story in the Old Testament as God delivers Israel out of slavery in Egypt. As the people packed the few possessions they owned, let alone could take with them, Moses packs some rather unusual luggage:

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."
(Exodus 13:19)

Moses carried the bones of Joseph with him out of Egypt, through 40 years in the wilderness and later we read that his successor Joshua re-buries them in the Promised Land. Why? The obvious reason is that Moses was fulfilling an oath made to one of Israel's most important patriarchs. But there is more. Leonard Sweet suggests that when Moses carried the bones of Joseph out of Egypt he carried more than an ancient relic. With the bones came a reminder. With the bones came memories.

Memories and reminders of the God who had provided for Joseph through the most difficult circumstances.

Memories of the God who had saved Israel in a time of worldwide famine.

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Memories of a God who worked miraculously through one, big, not often very happy, dysfunctional family.

Moses and Israel carried with them into an uncertain future memory of a certain God.

In a similar way, this is what we do today.

Today as we celebrate the end of this Time to Build season we carefully and deliberately remember what God has done and how God has spoken through this time. We take our collective memory and we carry it with us into the future as a treasure-trove of faith. The future will be full of uncertainties and bumps in the road. There will be times when we wonder if God has abandoned us. It is then we will draw on the memories that tell us God has never, and will never abandon us. Alexander Solzhenitsyn says this:

Own only what you can carry with you...Let your memory be your travel bag.
(Alexander Solzhenitsyn)

In the first week of this season, right back on May 1, I named a number of things that I believed and hoped God would do through this time. I believe each and every one of these hopes has been fulfilled.

First, God has moved us

God has reawakened in us a heart for the lost. This chair represents that heart. It represents those who are to come. The name on this chair speak even more powerfully. They represent those we hope and pray, that we are desperate to see come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Our heart for the lost has been reawakened as we have seen what God is doing as we establish our Pac Pines campus. Last week we showed a 90 second video of a school assembly of 700 kids and teachers ate which our Crossroads band played. The first time I watched that video I teared up. And then we showed it last Sunday and dozens of you cried. The fields are white for harvest but the labourers are few. Lord, send more labourers! God is moving some of you to the point you will not be able to ignore his call to be a part of the Pac Pine team.

God has moved us in other ways. On the first day of the Daily Devotions we have been using I asked you the question 'what moves you with compassion – what in our city breaks our heart.' Last week I received a letter with a pledge card enclosed. The letter also contained a cheque for \$3,000, not for Time to Build, but for another purpose. Let me read part of the letter, and from an earlier email:

Question: What social issues on the Gold Coast move you with compassion? I am distressed by teenage suicide on the Gold Coast and would like there to be more support for teenagers at risk, and for their families.

The cheque enclosed is my small gift, given with everlasting thanks and gratitude to God for blessing me with my two dear children...It is my wish that Robina Uniting Church should use this money to help and support Gold Coast teenagers at risk of suicide, and/or for the support of families of teenagers who have committed suicide.

Second, God has grown us

No more has God grown us than in our prayer. Hundreds of us have prayed every day as we have been reminded through SMS messages to draw aside. Dozens of us have gathered through the week in the cold of the early morning to pour our hearts out to God. And a few weeks ago we fasted and held a prayer vigil. That Saturday night this church and the Lakeside Lounge was holy ground. God met us powerfully and yet gently. It was awesome!

God has also stretched and strengthened our faith. I have permission to read another email I received recently that illustrates this point:

I just want to drop you a short note to say how much I feel that God is active in this Time to Build. I am really enjoying the daily reading notes and this morning's reading and reflection - Persistence - comes with perfect God-given timing!

(My husband's) work has been non-existent for the last 8 weeks and a couple of potential projects are frustratingly undetermined. I have been working full time for the first time in 20+ years and have been challenged by the frustration of working for one of my bosses for whom I can never seem to do anything right and whose negative attitude towards me has me and my close work friends completely baffled.

So today to read of spiritual battles is a perfect reminder of what we are really up against!

In amongst this, I am humbled as I look back God has been working. On 6th May I noted down Ephesians 6:10-17 - the same day that I noted that my fears were spiritual attack and deciding what to give.

The first fear is answered with Ephesians. God gave me the second answer (\$50 a week) in Church that Sunday. My husband is happy with this and I'll be giving up having my hair coloured to finance most of it - I know and trust that God will provide the rest. Look out for the increasingly grey-haired person (still 16 inside) appearing over the coming 3 years!

... Yes that's fine to read it out. Will be praying my boss won't be here on Sunday...(My husband) just set off for work. Praise the Lord! Even for the 6.30 start!

When I was 10 or 11 years old I suffered growing pains. My bones and muscles would ache at night as my frame was stretching and changing. Like physical growth, spiritual growth can be uncomfortable – painful even. But the other side of that growth is worth ever ache and pain.

Third, God has challenged us

I said right at the start that in any season like this there are usually three groups of people. There are those who jump on board early on. We were ready to pledge the first week. There is another small group, who for a whole bunch of reasons, many valid – don't participate.

Then there is a big group of us who started out a little nervous, a little unsure – perhaps even a bit sceptical. The disciples were nothing if not sceptical when Jesus asked them to prepare to feed 5000 hungry men. They had good reason to be sceptical. But Jesus challenged and moved them, and in a similar way he has been doing the same here these last few weeks.

We have pages and pages of notes that people wrote at our prayer vigil I want to read one of them. I don't know who it came from, but it moved me deeply:

I have heard negative talk about Time to Build. Some see it as a commercial fund raising campaign they see the Nehemiah devotions and the group study and the Sunday sermons as manipulative...

I remembered the statistics that with a project like this 15% will never get on board and the other 70% need time to think it through and may need some coaxing...

A thought came to me that when god wanted to bring his people out of Egypt he spoke to Moses but Moses had to coax more than a million people and I wondered perhaps that was the purpose of the ten Plagues not just a demonstration of gods power to Pharaoh but to show the people of Israel that god is powerful...

In this Last week my wife and I decided not to participate in the time to build campaign. I even put the response card in the bin I came to church last Sunday feeling confident about that decision. During the first half of Stu's sermon I was thinking to myself, 'No! This doesn't apply to me we've made our decision and I am comfortable with that.' But during the second half of Stu's sermon a thought came to me how we can contribute to this program. It wasn't Stu who persuaded me to change my mind - it was the Holy Spirit who inspired me.

If this program is Stu Cameron's idea we won't get the money and the church will have to think again but if God's in this we will. Thank you, Lord for this insight. Amen.

These last couple of months have been incredibly challenging for me, and I know Ralph and Melissa and other leaders. Yesterday I read one of my journal entries from May 23. It said this:

Half way into Time to Build and part of me wonders why we ever started. It is stretching my faith, our faith, Lord to breaking point. I know logically that it is the 'land in between' where we have the promise of meeting you. But as much as I was prepared for the intensity of this season, it still feels almost overwhelming. I feel like one of those news reporters trying to stand tall in the face of a howling hurricane, in danger of tumbling over at any moment. Lord, I need you. Only you can hold me secure. Only you can deliver me from my doubts. Only you can achieve this vision you have set before us.

God has challenged us as a community like never before. He has challenged us to trust him with our finances. Let me be up front – the challenge does not end today. In many ways it has just begun. The challenge will be there every time we make a direct deposit or put a cheque into a Time to Build envelope. The challenge will always be to finish the race we have begun. Paul said this to the church at Corinth, and he says it to us:

Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

(2 Corinthians 8:11)

Fourth, God has used us

Our Time to Build season has been modelled on some work and material of Rick Warren, author of 40 Days of Purpose and the Pastor of Saddleback Church in California. Warren has said this:

What we often wait for God to do for us, God is waiting to do through us.

(Rick Warren)

Like Jesus did when he fed the 5000 through the hands and resources of the disciples, God has performed a miracle of provision through us. And he has used every generation in our church.

Last week I love hearing the rattle of money tins as our kids brought their Time to Build offerings forward. That was a joyful noise!

I loved seeing teenagers still in high school bringing their pledge cards forward.

I knew we were in for a great day when at our 7.30 service people streamed forward. 7.30 people – I love you! You inspire me! Every Sunday morning you are here when we all should still be in bed. You are our faithful and steadfast ones – the sure footing of our church.

I loved hearing from Barry and Ken say that our young adults pledged more than anyone would normally expect.

God has used all of us – young and old, rich and poor.

Then we got this letter from Caleb. Caleb is our brother from the Solomon Islands who is with us for a year. Last week Caleb pledged. By our standards, Caleb's resources are very limited. Someone asked Caleb why he was pledging, after all he was our guest? Caleb's response was he was responding to the word of God. I have Caleb's permission to read his letter:

From Caleb,

Apart from missing my family, the greatest joy I have is to be part of this Time to Build season of Newlife Uniting Church. As a visitor it is too easy to let go or just ignore the challenge of being part of what God is doing here in this place, at this time. But the messages from God's word from the first day of the campaign till last Sunday has challenged and convinced me that I and my family are to participate in his mission despite our littleness and with the little we have. Another thing I did was end my wife Tanya in summary the messages Stu preached each Sunday. And by doing this, God also spoke to Tanya as he did to me.

As believers we believe God want us to participate in what he is doing wherever we are. With humility I offer this small gift on behalf of my wife Tanya, son Jabez and daughter Tara. Just a little lad who offered Jesus five loaves of bread and two fish. We know that we will not be here to see all that God will be doing through you all and in this church, but we will confidently say that we have participated, and we will continue to pray for those chairs.

God bless Newlife Uniting Church.

Some of us have struggled with a sense that our gift is inadequate. We have fallen for the lie that what we have pledged is not important. Paul goes on in his letter to the Corinthians to say this:

If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

(2 Corinthians 8:12)

God is not interested in the size of your gift but in the state of your heart!

Fifth, God has surprised us

We started back on May 1 by reflecting on the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand. We say how Jesus used five small loaves and two small fish to demonstrate his 'over and above' and 'abundantly more' love and power.

We knew that to fulfil what we believed God was calling us to as a church we needed a miracle of provision not unlike that miracle two thousand years ago on the shores of Galilee. This is what my sermon said that day:

To achieve this vision we are going to need a miracle of God's provision. The project will cost \$4.5million dollars. \$3million of that \$4.5 million dollars will need to be given from the resources of people like you and me who call Newlife home.

\$3million! We must be crazy. Let's be honest, it's not a great time in our economy, particularly here on the Gold Coast. Let me be personal; I don't know about you, but when Sue and I look at our financial resources we are tempted to see nothing much more than a few stale loaves of bread and a couple of smelly fish.

Make no mistake, to achieve the vision God has set before us, we need a miracle of God's provision like the miracle that fed the crowd. We are in an 'Only God' moment in the life of our church. Only as God moves in and through us will we see this miracle of provision happen.

We needed an 'only God' miracle. AW Tozer has said this:

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Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here.
(AW Tozer)

The Psalmist says this:

You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.
(Psalm 77:14)

And as we hope for and prayed for and planned for and cried out to God for – we have been surprised with an ‘only God’ miracle of provision. In a few moments Melissa, Ralph and me will share the size and extent of that miracle, but before we do we are going to pray and sing and invite the kids to join us.

As we finish, let me remind you again, remember this time. Remember what we have learned. Remember what God has been doing. And let us carry these memories forward into God’s future for us.

Do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.
(Deuteronomy 4:9)