

First English
September 17, 2017

Good morning. Thanks for having Habitat here today. I'd like for you to do some imagining with me. Imagine your home. What are your joys of your home? Cooking, gardening, mowing the lawn, having a garage and not scraping your windows in the winter, having a washer and dryer?

Now imagine raising your children in a space a quarter of the size of your home, you're sharing a room with one of your children, it's winter and wind blows through the space between the window and the wall. You have to haul your laundry for your family up and down three flights of stairs. Cigarette smoke flows under the door cracks. You barely scrape enough money together for this month's rent – and your landlord told you rent is going up next month.

YOU HAVE JUST MOVED INTO THE LIVES OF OVER 4,000
HOUSEHOLDS IN RICE COUNTY.

Habitat for Humanity was created to change that story. Habitat is an affordable housing program that was created out of a Christian conviction that people deserve a simple, decent and affordable place to live.

Families who are selected for Habitat can feel like their lives are open to the public in many ways. The public knows they are lower income and that they have had some struggles. 99.9% of the time our community welcomes and engages with our families in beautiful and life affirming ways.

I have to say, though, in this time where everyone has a platform with social media, I have been surprised, over the last years, the opposition and judgement we have heard about who we select to partner with. Perhaps

our political climate contributes to this feeling that we can publicly judge one another with such hatred, disgust and condemnation.

I have literally gotten phone messages, e-mails or facebook posts that say “This person does not deserve to get a Habitat house. I know for a fact that they.....” and they list their grievances against the person. Wow – the judgement is palpable.

Judgement. Boy, there’s a good side and a bad side to that word, that action, isn’t there? The definition of judgement: *the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions*. “Use good judgement” – I say to my 15 year old when he goes to hang out with friends, or when he’s driving now with his drivers permit. “Use good judgement” – come to a sensible conclusion, I’m hoping. Of course, I want his conclusion to be according to my sensibilities, rather than his not yet fully developed sensibilities!

There’s another side to judgement, though, isn’t there – it’s JUDGEMENT. I’ve been judged. You’ve been judged. We have judged.

Baked into how Habitat makes decisions about who we select, we make judgements about people. We have to – we do not have the resources to meet the demand and need for affordable housing. We’re careful to have criteria about our judgement: 1) Need for Housing –Is their current place inadequate in some way? Are they paying too much of their income for rent?

2) Willingness to partner – every family puts in 350 hours of time working on their home or contributing to Habitat in some way.

Our third criteria, Ability to Pay is perhaps where the most judgement can filter in – what’s their income and what’s their debt? Lots of room for judgement here, isn’t there? Why do you have outstanding cell phone bills

and why does your 9 year old have their own phone? Why did you buy that car with that high monthly payment? Why do you keep getting your nails done when you can't pay rent? Those are my sensibilities getting in the way of truly understanding the other, isn't it?

There's a training called "Bridges Out of Poverty" that helps us understand the common modes of operation of people in wealth, middle class and poverty. The concept that made the most sense to me was this: people in wealth often come from generational wealth – the wealth goes back to grandparents or great grandparents. The mode of operation for these folks is creating a legacy, a future story, not just for themselves but for their children and grandchildren. Their basic needs are taken care of by themselves, or others, and they don't have to think about it. Their time and energy is towards the future.

People in poverty, have often been in poverty for generations. Their parents were poor, their grandparents were poor. There's little thought of saving for the future – nobody did for them so that's just not what you do. Any money you do have is about survival for today. And, since you may not have that money tomorrow, you might as well make yourself happy for today – thus the big screen tv's, the new car, the nails getting done.

People in middle class tend to have a foot in both modes. They may save for retirement and college for their kids, but they also want the things for today – the boat, the nicer house, the vacations.

Think about what mode you operate in? Wealth, middle class or poverty. What are your judgements about the other? How does that influence what you think, how you behave, what you support, what you condemn?

Judgement leads to deservedness. I always try to steer away from this notion of "deservedness". I try to never use the phrase, "This person

DESERVES a Habitat house". I believe we ALL deserve a decent, sanitary, affordable place to live – there's no judgement needed. Habitat does the best we can in being good stewards of the resources we have to select the families where we believe this hand up of affordable housing will give them the most traction to improve their lives. Sometimes we get a picture perfect story – like in the case with Becky Zoubek, who you'll hear from in just a minute.

But, sometimes, the story turns out to be less than perfect - because WE are imperfect. Our applicants, our families, our volunteers, our staff – we are all imperfect and yet, as a community, we come together to take the next right step towards what God is calling us to do. That is to love one another, accept one another, to be with each other in this imperfect world.

God also calls us to forgive. The gospel reading for today begins by Peter wondering, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?" That question was asked by Habitat over these last years, too. Some of you may have heard Troy Simonson, Partner Family from 2008, share his story at a Raise the Roof Dinner a couple of years ago. Troy and his family were selected and shortly after Troy ended up in jail on several charges of drugs and assault. Big front page article about it in the newspaper – "Habitat Homeowner ends up in jail" – judgement and questions of deservedness were all over that. But the follow up story of REDEMPTION never hit the paper. The public never knew, but that I personally witnessed, Troy apologizing for the lies he told our Habitat volunteers. And I don't know if I ever witnessed before true forgiveness between two people. A Habitat volunteer and Troy, sitting across from each other, in true communion with each other.

So you see, we never know how our story and the stories of others are going to end. But we do know how the ultimate story ends – God embraces all of us.

Romans 14:12: “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” Not an account of the other; not an account of our justifications of why we behaved the way we did. An account of what was in our hearts.

I’m so grateful that you have people in this congregation who are compelled, by their faith, to extend a hand on the build site, bring hotdishes and salads to feed our volunteers, and give money to support our mission. I’m excited to introduce Becky Zoubek and she’ll share how Habitat has made a difference in the life of her family.