

Proper 13 C July 31, 2016

The House that Alex Jordan Built

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Have you ever heard of Alex Jordan Jr? He was born on March 3, 1914 in Madison, Wisconsin; the son of a wealthy architect, he is not known for his beliefs nor vision nor of how he helped people. What Alex Jordan Jr is known for is his great big House on the Rock outside of the town of Spring Green, Wisconsin. In 1945, Alex began construction on his large house which sits on top of a column of rock called Deer Shelter Rock. The design of the house is said to be either an attempt to copy the well-known architect Frank Lloyd Wright, or is an intentional insult to him. The house is expansive, features elements of nature, and boasts a narrow room that extends out over the forest below. And that is just the beginning. Jordan built enormous windowless rooms in his house and filled them with all kinds of what have described as macabre, grotesque, and just strange items such as a 200 ft. model of sea monsters in the midst of a vicious fight, the largest carousel in the world with 269 carousel animals, most of which are bizarre looking, hundreds of mechanized instruments that play themselves (or at least look like they do), doorways that look like gaping mouths of monsters, a replica of an early 20th century main street in a small town, hundreds of department store mannequins dressed up to look like cartoon angels, and that is just a few of the hundreds of thousands of oddities that stuff the humongous rooms in the enormous House on the Rock. Alex Jordan discovered he could fund his obsession with collecting and creating oddities by opening up his house and charging a fee to tour it, which he did in 1959. Ever since then, tourists from all over the world have come to see this house and Jordan's rooms full of weird things. If, you are ever driving through southern Wisconsin, you might want to stop and check it out.

You can read all kinds of reviews and reflections from visitors to The House on the Rock on their official website or through Roadside America, a group of journalists that publishes reviews on roadside attractions. The first thing most people who visit House on the Rock say is that this is not a tour for the faint of heart nor weak of knees nor sore of feet: as it takes nearly 4 hours to walk through the entire house. And while a few people delight in the bizarre, often disturbing collections, many more leave with a sense of being dazed and confused: overwhelmed by the sheer volume of strange things they have just seen and confused because none of the items are well cared for. The collection of

antique books are moldy, water damaged, and dusty. Dust isn't just on books, a thick layer of it is everywhere you look, which has led many to observe Jordan's collection might really be a display of hoarding or greed rather than a careful display of anything of value. No one has ever called it beautiful or inspiring. Many people emerge from the experience wondering more about the person who built it all and why. Biographers have very little to say about Jordan other than he was the type of person for whom more was never enough. He was reclusive, not good at giving credit to the artists he hired to help create his strange displays, and who created only what he wanted.

Perhaps the most intriguing response to visiting the House on the Rock came from award winning writer Neil Gaiman who featured the House in his novel *American Gods*. In the novel, the House on the Rock is a place where the ancient pagan and mythological gods of long ago gather, in part because they are fading away for lack of attention by the people of America, who have moved on to new gods like technology and politics. And the over the top extravagance of the House on the Rock is just the kind of temple they want. After reading Gaiman's novel it seems to me he saw Jordan's over the top house as an expression of the type of extreme selfishness Jesus was talking about when he told the parable about another rich man who was rich toward himself when he build an enormous barn of his own.

The inspiration for the parable of the rich man in today's Gospel came from a person who asked Jesus to arbitrate a family dispute concerning the sharing of a family inheritance. Instead of doing what was asked of him, Jesus talked about being aware of what the author of Luke called not just greed, but "all kinds of greed".

Greed is listed as one of the "7 Deadly Sins", and is the opposite of generosity. Greed is considered to be a voracious, insatiable appetite; the desire for more and more, whether it is possessions, money, attention, or whatever a person wants. It is, as one biographer of Alex Jordan Jr described, living in a way where "more is never enough". Although some argue greed can be good when it comes to attaining success, in the Gospels Jesus warns his listeners to guard against it. To illustrate this warning, he told the parable of the rich man who built an enormous barn to hold his abundant crops and then decided he didn't have to do anything else except to enjoy that which he had. In the parable, God's response to the man was to call him a fool, and point out that he would not be enjoying any of those crops because his life was over.

Jesus pressed the point by saying life is more than accumulating possessions, and all those possessions, whatever they are, are just a lot of dusty junk if a person is not rich toward God. Notice Jesus didn't say the possessions in and of themselves were bad, instead he seems to be saying they are somehow wasted if a person does not live their life in a way that is not rich toward God. I love that phrase: being rich toward God. It sounds so different from the other things going on in today's Gospel, and may be the very thing Jesus might be asking his listeners and us to think about.

We certainly could argue that Alex Jordan Jr and the rich man in the parable were rich toward themselves. Perhaps that is another way we can define and recognize greed. The House on the Rock may have the largest carousel in the world, but no one is allowed to ride it. While you and I can pay to look at it, it wasn't for anyone else to enjoy but Alex Jordan, who died in the late 1980's which means now no one can really enjoy it. So it can be relatively easy to imagine what it means to rich toward self, but what does it mean to be rich toward God?

Being rich toward God could mean loving God before all else: with our whole self: our heart, mind, soul and strength. Being rich toward God means ordering our lives so that God is our first priority, and everything we do is centered around God, instead of seeing God as a sort of diving vending machine in the sky we go to and ask what we want when we want it. Being rich toward God means we ask God what God wants us to do, and spend some time listening for God's response. This means spending time in worship, prayer, and study in order to gain a deeper understanding of God.

Being rich toward God means seeing our gifts, skills and passions as originating from God and using them to help improve the world and the lives of others, which means being intentional about how we spend our time, our money, and even our vote. Being rich toward God means seeing God in one another, and in the world around us, and caring for each other and the world accordingly, which means doing things like loving and praying for our enemies, and forgiving. Being rich toward God means being generous with our whole selves: sharing what we have, what we believe, what we are in order to not only make the world a better place, but to help make God's love, God's kingdom, God's dream of how God wants all our lives to be, visible everywhere we are. When we are rich toward God, instead of creating our own kingdom, like Alex Jordan did, we get to work with God to bring God's kingdom right here.

What an important mission that can be today when it might be more tempting to give into and participate in the fear and despair and frustration the media loves to broadcast. That news can be overwhelming, and can leave any one of us dazed and confused, or disheartened, especially when the root of so many problems seems to be greed of power, money, prestige, or even attention. Perhaps we are living in a time where so much is changing, so little is guaranteed, and that can make us uncomfortable and cause some to want to hang on to whatever they can, maybe even build their own version of a house of dark rooms filled with their version of how they want the world to be. But this is not the only time our world or our country has faced changes and failed guarantees. When faced with such challenges, whether they are on personal, institutional, national, or international levels, we can remember there is another way to live. One where we have the opportunity to live the richness of God's love. This love can be what exposes the selfish fantasies of the greedy for what they are: which like the House on the Rock, is so much less than what they can be.

As we continue with our service of worship this morning, perhaps we can take advantage of this opportunity to renew our commitment to give ourselves, our hearts, souls, minds, and strength to God. To let go, at least for the rest of the service, of that which distracts us, tempts us, upsets us and give our attention to God. And when it comes time to leave the church today and enter into a new week, perhaps we can go intentionally aware of the ways we can be rich toward God, recognizing when God shows up, perhaps in unexpected ways and unexpected places, and work with God to make things like love, forgiveness, mercy, grace, and hope visible in whatever we say and do.