

“Lifting Heavy Loads”

By: Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scripture:

Matthew 11: 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Matthew 23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others... 11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

Luke 21:12b ...and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

Sermon:

On the evening of July 19, 2018, lawyers representing the Fellowship and myself gave a 30 minute presentation of our proposal at the Planning & Zoning Board Meeting.

The plan was to split the time evenly with the lawyers, of course, handling the rules and regulations and the specifics of zoning rules. I was encouraged to mainly speak to the why, particularly religiously, it was important that we, a church, must provide these lockers at our property.

I tried to keep my part to about 12 minutes, less than half, so the lawyers would have plenty of time!

I decided to give you all a slightly expanded version this morning since I know you all would want more than just a 12 minute sermon!

Good evening, Chairman and members of the board.
My name is Steve Ramer and I am the pastor of the Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship, located at 300 E. Oak in Old Town Ft Collins.

For more than 40 years FCMF has been a vital congregation of folks trying to follow Jesus' in Ft. Collins.

Long before our move to our current location in 2002, we have been involved in various ministries with the homeless in our community.

But we have also been active in many other ways supporting the larger Ft. Collins community.

We help start the fair trade store, Ten Thousands Villages, which supports poor communities around the world. In fact, it was one of the first stores at the time to commit to opening in the then planned renovations of the now Linden Street plaza.

We have also worked closely with other downtown efforts such as providing water stations and bathrooms during NewWestFest, as well as a location for First Night FC events.

Over the years our building has been in use nearly every evening as meeting space for many community organizations. We take pride in being a resource for the larger community as we all strive to make Ft Collins a welcoming place for all.

As Mennonites, we are part of a larger denomination whose origins go back over 500 years to a movement in central Europe that was harshly persecuted for re-baptizing adult converts.

Due in part to that persecution, which was legal at the time we began to spread throughout Europe, then to colonial America and finally, throughout the world.

Our history has included many periods of transient wanderings, as homeless and stateless communities looking for safe places, not only for survival, but to live out our faith.

We hold central all the key beliefs of orthodox, protestant Christianity and though we fail more often than not, we do try to take seriously the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Since Jesus taught us to love our enemies we are pacifist and because he showed a particular interest in the needs of the poor it is then not an option for us to care for the least amongst us.

As one of the earliest leaders of our movement said, "One cannot truly say they know Christ unless they follow him in life."

Safe and secure lockers for our homeless sisters and brothers is a perfect example of our desire to "live out" our expression of faith.

Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew says, "Come to me, all of you who are weak and tired of carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest."

Providing lockers on our property will not only allow us to "follow Christ," by literally relieving the heavy loads that the poorest amongst us carry up and down the streets of old town every day of the week.

But safe and secure storage for the homeless will also help to relieve the burdens of worry and anxiety that many of these folks experience, wondering if their things will be stolen or thrown away while they are at work or shopping for their necessities of life.

Over the past five years we have worked closely with the Ft Collins Homelessness Coalition. During this time the FCHC has regularly conducted surveys of our homeless citizens and each and every time the need for secure storage that is accessible 24/7 has been at the top of their list.

Even the City Council agreed with us two years ago that this was a necessary investment and directed city staff to use city funds to locate community partners to get this done.

But in the end we were the **only** organization to come forward with a proposal. And with the help of city staff we were able to write, gain approval and then sign a Service Agreement to fund a one year a pilot project.

Following months of community discussions, however, the Ft Collins City Council voted to withdraw the funding. With City Council and staff encouragement, we decided to seek private funding for this necessary project.

In less than two weeks we were able to raised enough funds from individual donors, who are overwhelmingly from Ft. Collins to begin the installation of the lockers.

But within days of unloading our first shipment of lockers we received a letter from city staff informing us of the need to file the Minor Adjustment application that you have before you.

Throughout the process the City Manager's office has been trying to get us to move the lockers inside, limit the hours of access, and "supervise" folks as they access personal belongings.

But this is just physically impossible!

Between our own needs and those of the organizations who use our building on a regular basis, there is literally not enough appropriate space.

Moving the lockers inside or behind a locked fence and limiting the hours of access would also unnecessarily duplicate the current secure storage option that already exists.

For some folks who are experiencing homelessness, the lockers at the Murphy Center are sufficient for their needs. But as I already mentioned, the need to access belongings at other times does require a program that is 24/7 to sufficiently cover needs of most people.

Having staff supervise lockers 12 hours every day is also not prudent, since it would exponentially increase the cost of the program.

Our little church is also strategically located, close to public transportation as well as to many of the services our homeless sisters and brothers need to access.

You can also see from the slides, that the location of the lockers along our back wall will be highly visible from the alley and street, with lots of vehicle and pedestrian traffic passing by.

The view of the lockers will actually be even greater than 180 degrees since neighboring apartments can gaze down upon them from above.

And with the additional lighting we propose, along with a new security camera installed in the back of the church, public safety, for both the locker participants, as well as, for our neighbors will actually be enhanced per the status quo.

The locker program will be actively managed by the church. Each participant will be interviewed prior to getting a locker. Participants will only be able to use the locker for three months. Anyone wanting a locker will be placed on a waiting list. Notifications will be given prior to the end of the three months. Items left in a locker will be stored for a limited time. Church staff will have access to all lockers at any time. Folks who violate any of the rules will face immediate termination of their locker privileges.

Add to all this is that you have an entire congregation that is not only highly motivated, but also extremely enthusiastic to make this program a success!

Ultimately, like all our efforts, our goal is not just to provide storage but it is to build relationships with all our neighbors, and especially with those who are experiencing homelessness. Many of the folks who will benefit from these lockers are already participating with us at our church.

Lockers then, in our humble estimation, can be one more, albeit a very small way, in which we are trying to build what the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the Beloved Community!"

Twenty lockers will not solve homelessness in Ft Collins, but it may just be a part of the puzzle.

Please approve our application without adding any additional, undue burdens so that we can get started and proceed with what we truly believe God is calling us to do.

Steve Ramer

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