

Unless God Builds the House

Psalm 127:1-2 *Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for God gives sleep to his beloved.*

Mark 12:38-44 *“...she out of her poverty has put in everything she
had, all she had to live on.”*

The two verses of Psalm 127 that we read this morning speak of two dimensions of the spiritual life, the life that is centering itself more and more in God.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” The building of the Jerusalem temple may have been behind this psalm. God was skeptical of the idea of a temple. Constructing a great religious facility might be an authentic expression of devotion. It can also become an idol, a projection of the egos of those who build it and the illusion that God can be nailed down and possessed. The psalm reminds people that their relationship with the living God is of first importance, not the project of the temple.

Let us take the building of the temple, or a house, as an image. Unless God is the wellspring of our living, what we do becomes empty. Unless what we do arises from our awareness of God as creator and sustainer of life, our actions become self-serving projects, even if they are on the surface quite altruistic and even “successful”. This points to the importance of what we call the inward journey. The cultivation of our inner sensitivity to God and God’s will for life shape the outward dimension of our lives. That is the only way it can work, the psalmist is saying. Otherwise even our best efforts can become expressions of our own egos and insecurities. The spiritual life is about living from the center of our being, where we are in touch with God. It is not primarily about doing good things.

Toward the end of my work with more traditionally structured churches, I began to feel the weight of this very heavily. Though there were many experiences of people and churches responding to the inner direction of God, there was an overriding burden of building up and sustaining the institution, and being obsessed with the building, upkeep, and expansion of church facilities. The sign of whether one’s church was successful or not seemed to be how one was doing in relation to other churches in the

community. Are we as big or popular? Is our music program better than theirs? And so forth.

Meanwhile, I was focusing my own work as a pastor and teacher on those who wanted more, wanted something deeper and more real, that is, an authentic spiritual life. This got me into trouble at times, as I was not sympathetic to the desires for a bigger budget or building or program. As an administrator, or as even ministers are sometimes called today, a CEO, I was pretty much a failure. What turned me on, what really kept me going, were those persons who “got it,” who knew that there was something prior to everything else, that there was something without which all the rest was, as the psalm says, in vain. These were people who wanted to really live the life of faith, not just talk about it and not substitute institutional religion for it. They sensed in their hearts that unless God builds the house, or the life, or the mission, it is all pretty meaningless.

That is why we make so much of this thing we call the “inward journey.” It is how we work with rooting and grounding our lives in God so that our lives become an expression of God’s love and will, God’s peace and justice. When we commit time each day to looking inwardly, to sitting in silence, to reading and reflecting on scripture, to letting ourselves become more aware of the present moment and our presence with God in that moment, then we begin to touch that vital connection between our own unique lives and God’s reality and purposes. We begin to discern who we really are and what it is we are given to be and do in and for the world.

The inward journey is also the way we become non-judgmentally aware of the ways our egos and insecurities get entwined with our efforts to live the life Christ calls us to. I say non-judgmentally, which is very important. It does no good to beat ourselves up or feel guilty about the shadier sides of ourselves. We simply become aware of them, and immediately they lose most of their power. Awareness is everything. Coming to fuller awareness of the reality of ourselves, strengths and weaknesses, healthiness and unhealthiness, is a crucial part of the life of prayer. The more we understand ourselves and how we get in the way of our true self, the more room is made in us for what God wants to do through us. We become empty and clear enough to be channels of God’s spirit and love. This is what it means to remember that God is building the house, not us.

Another thing that gets in the way of God building the house through us is our tendency to say yes to everything and become over-committed. For this reason, we talk about “call” and “gifts.” When we aren’t in touch with who we really are and who we are not, what our gifts are and what they are not, we tend to get involved in a lot of activities and work with little else but our zeal and passion. But that can’t last long, and it can’t have much of an effect. Growing in our understanding of what we feel called to do, what gifts we have, and making a deep commitment are the ingredients for a life that not only has an effect in the world but also brings us joy and fulfillment. Both are important if our lives are to be an expression of God. We can work to alleviate

the needs of others and the world, and we can be fulfilled in doing so because that is what we feel put on this earth to do.

Then the psalmist says: “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved.” Other translations put it: “...for God provides all that we need even while we sleep.” Either way, this is a call to let go of our anxiousness and the fretful way we often live our lives. It is a call to inner peacefulness in the midst of our activity, our work. One of my several major spiritual challenges is just at this point. Maybe it is the same for you, too. Anxiety. Worry. Fretfulness. Lying awake at night or waking in the middle of the night with that cold, hard feeling of dread or fear about something or other.

There is nothing in Jesus’ teachings that calls us to make our lives into a knot of pressure and anxiousness. Just the opposite. Jesus calls us to complete obedience and faithfulness, following him on the way of the cross. Yet he says nothing to us about needing to become filled with tension and severity. In the Sermon on the Mount he tells us to contemplate the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, and learn from them how to trust God for everything we need. Then Jesus tells us outright—Do NOT be anxious about tomorrow. He also says elsewhere, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Not heavy. Not burdensome. Not full of anxiety. But complete faithfulness that is at the same time at complete peace.

Psalm 23 says that God “leads me beside still water; God restores my soul.” Another way to translate that is “God leads me beside waters of rest.” Have you noticed how often we complain of being too busy and being tired? It makes me wonder if we don’t have some kind of Puritanical aversion to being rested. What if someone asked you how you are and you said, “Why, I feel very good. I feel quite rested, thank you.” Wouldn’t you feel a little funny about that? Sort of like you were guilty of something. There seems to be a kind of badge of honor associated with running around with our tongues hanging out and being exhausted.

Why have we made our lives so busy? Why do we say “yes” to more things than we can do well, especially things we don’t really feel called to do? What do we think we are accomplishing for others or ourselves by being over-committed and unfocused? And, what is the condition of our spirits when we are so tired and frazzled? Does it make us more loving and accepting of people? Does it help our perspective on life? Does it nurture in us a thankful or joyful spirit? Hardly. So, maybe there is something spiritually wrong when we find ourselves thinking that a busy, harried, anxious, and tiresome life has something to do with the life of faith.

So the psalm is about a life that is completely trusting in God. It is about a life that is lived with increasing awareness of God and what is of God and what is not. It is a life that understands how important it is to live out of a clear sense of who God is and what God calls us to do for the world. I am re-reading Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays after many years. I appreciate

Emerson more than when I was a young student. Though a bright, rising star, Emerson pretty soon became unpopular with the staid churches in and around Boston. He thought that faith had nothing to do with simply ingesting or repeating dogmas and theological beliefs. We have to live the life of faith for ourselves. That means realizing our relationship with God, letting that relationship flourish and express itself in our living. It is living with our souls open to God so that our lives increasingly become fountains of God's spirit and creativity. Emerson said things like that when invited to speak to the Harvard Divinity School senior class. His words stirred some to great excitement, but many, including the faculty, to great anger. He was shunned by his alma mater for over twenty-five years after that! I think Emerson was on to what the psalmist was saying--unless God builds the house, those who build it work in vain. We are made to be channels of what God wants to do through us, our uniqueness, our commitments, our gifts. We are also made to be at peace within ourselves, not contributing to the anxiousness and antagonisms of life. Complete commitment and complete peace. That's what it means for God to build the house in us and through us.

The story from Mark's gospel gives us a picture of what the psalm is getting at. I leave us with this picture. Jesus criticizes the scribes for being caught in conformity and ego and power-seeking, while at the same time ignoring and exploiting the poor, such as the widows. The scribes and other religious leaders were, in Jesus' view, engaged in building the house themselves and for themselves, not letting God build the house through them.

Then Jesus sits by the offering receptacle at the temple. He watches what people put in. Imagine the gall of Jesus looking at what people give to the church, that is, the temple! Jesus sees the actions of people as a clear expression of what kind of relationship they have with God.

Jesus suddenly gets very excited and calls his disciples over. Look there, he says, at that poor widow, just the sort of person the scribes take advantage of. Look what she put in--her whole income! That's what I'm talking about! Yes, those wealthy folks put in large sums. But they didn't risk anything. Their faith, their trust in God is safe and superficial, a pittance. This woman embodies what it means to live by faith, to entrust our whole being to God. Her life has become transparent to God in devotion and in peace. She has let God build her very life as a temple.