

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 verses of Psalm 127 that we read earlier led me to reflect on two dimensions of the spiritual life.

The first has to do with our lives becoming more harmonious with who God is and what God is doing in and for the world. When we are doing that, we are at the same time touching our truest selves, the persons God created us to be.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor 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 be a projection of the egos of the builders, bringing with it 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, or anything else they should undertake.

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 risk becoming 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 shapes the outward dimension of our lives. That is the only way it can work, the psalmist is saying. Otherwise even our best efforts become expressions of our egos and insecurities, our desire to achieve something for ourselves. The spiritual life is about living from the center of our being, where we are in touch with God. It is not first of all about doing good things, but doing those things to which we feel ourselves called.

Toward the end of my work with traditionally structured churches, I began to feel the weight of this in a way that was crushing my spirit. Over the years, there had been many instances of people and churches responding to the inner direction of God. However, there was the overriding burden of building up and sustaining the institution. There was the preoccupation in people’s minds with how their church compared to others in the community. Were we as big or popular? Was our music or youth program superior? And so forth.

I was increasingly focusing my work on those who wanted something deeper and more real--an authentic spiritual life. I lost interest in bigger budgets or buildings or programs. As an administrator, or CEO, as even ministers are sometimes called today, I was pretty much a washout. What turned me on 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 ministry, it is all pretty meaningless.

This is why we make so much of what we call the “inward journey.” It is how we work with rooting and grounding our lives in God so that our living becomes an expression of God’s love and will, God’s peace and justice. When we take time each day to looking inwardly, sitting in silence, reading and reflecting on scripture, becoming more aware of the present moment and our presence with God in that moment, then we 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 where we become non-judgmentally aware of the ways our egos and insecurities

get entwined with our efforts to live the life to which Jesus calls us. 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 and more honest awareness of our weaknesses AND strengths, our unhealthiness AND healthiness, is a crucial part of the life of prayer. The more we understand and accept the wholeness of who we are, 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.

One of the things that gets in the way of God building the house through us is our tendency to say yes to everything and become over-committed. This is why 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 mostly deeply called to do, what gifts we have, and making a deep commitment are dimensions of a life that not only has an effect in the world but also brings us joy and fulfillment. We can live in ways that serve life AND we can be fulfilled in doing so because that is what we feel put on this earth to do.

The second thing the psalmist says is: "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." Another translation puts it: "...for God provides all that we need even while we sleep." Either way, this is a call to let go of 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. 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. We don't have to be hyper-vigilant. If God is watching over the city, we don't have to be on guard all the time. And the psalm's assumption is that God IS watching over the city, so we can drop our hyper-vigilance.

There is nothing in Jesus' teachings that says we should be full of pressure and anxiousness. Just the opposite. Jesus calls us to complete faithfulness to the ways of God. He says nothing about the virtues of tension, worry, and anxiety. 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. It is complete faithfulness that is, at the same time, 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 and 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 badge of honor associated with running around with our tongues hanging out and being exhausted all the time.

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 uncentered? 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 and anxious life has something to do with the life of faith. Here the psalm says that God gives us rest, gives us sleep.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a bright, rising star in theological and church circles. But he pretty soon became unpopular with the staid churches in and around Boston. He thought that faith had nothing to do with simply ingesting dogmas and theological beliefs, or perpetuating a religious institution. We have to discover and live the life of faith for ourselves. That means seeking out 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's ideal was not the theologian sitting in some ivory tower or the silver-tongued preacher perched on a lofty pulpit. His ideal was embodied in his strange friend Thoreau, who was out building a hut on the shore of Walden Pond so he could spend two years observing and living life deeply, and who knew when to put down his books and go huckleberrying with children in the fields

around Concord.

Emerson talked about these kinds of things when invited to speak to the Harvard Divinity School senior class. His words stirred great excitement among students, but anger among the faculty. 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. Our spiritual work is to transcend the small ego that does neither us nor the world any good, and discover our true, greater Self in our relatedness to God and God's presence and movements in and for the world. 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 ignoring and exploiting the poor, such as 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.

Jesus goes and sits by the offering receptacle at the temple. He watches what people put in. Imagine the gall of Jesus looking at what we give! Jesus sees the actions of people as a clear expression of what kind of relationship they have with God. The wealthy give great sums, but Jesus is not impressed.

Jesus suddenly gets 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. My unscientific observations through the years have led me to this conclusion: Those who have the most to give financially are those who complain the most in hard economic times or about any suggestion that they might tithe. Generally it seems that those who have the least are consistently the most generous and do not complain about or call attention to their giving. 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, and the result is a radical generosity that does not call attention to itself. She has let God build her very life as a temple.