

November 11, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Unless God Builds the House

Psalm 127:1-2        *Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain....*

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 for this morning lead me to reflect on two dimensions of the spiritual life, or the life of faith, as we understand and work with it here in our community.

First, there is the harmonizing of our lives with God and what God is doing in and for the world. When we are doing that, through the inward and outward journeys, we are touching our authentic selves, the persons God created us to be. We can drop pretenses. We can stop trying to be something, and simply be who God made us to be and do what God calls and gifts us to do.

***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. Hebrew scriptures picture God as skeptical of the project of a temple. It was a human idea, not God's. Constructing a great religious facility might be an true expression of devotion. It can also be a projection of the egos of the builders, and foster the illusion that God can be boxed in 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. Whether it is building the temple or their homes or their lives, the crucial thing is for our efforts to flow from our connection with and love of God.

Unless God is the wellspring of our living, what we do becomes empty. Unless our doing, our outward journey, if you will, arises from deep 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 is the importance of the inward journey. The cultivation of our inner sensitivity to God and God’s will for life shapes the outward expression 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 authentically called by God who is the One doing them through us.

Through the years of my work with traditionally structured churches, I had seen many instances of persons and congregations responding to the inner direction of God. However, there was always 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. How can we get more members? How can we be bigger and more popular? How can we get people to give more money? And so forth.

I increasingly felt called to focus my energy and efforts on those who wanted something deeper and more real--an authentic spiritual life. I lost interest in budgets or buildings or programs. Committee meetings became torturous. As an administrator, or CEO, as even ministers are sometimes called today, I was pretty much a washout. I knew I needed to work with those who were "getting it", who sensed deep down that there was something prior to everything else, 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 what the psalmist was getting at, that unless God builds the house, or the life, it can all be an impressive but empty show, whether it is the temple or the temple of our lives.

This is why I make so much of what we call the "inward journey." It is how we day by day root and ground our lives in God so that our living becomes an real and vibrant expression of God's love and will. When we take time each day to look inwardly, sitting in silence, reading and reflecting on scripture, becoming more aware of our presence with God, growing in self-understanding and awareness, 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 who we are not, what we are given to be and do in and for the world, and what is not ours. 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. We can live in ways that serve life AND be fulfilled in doing so because that is what we feel put on this earth to be and to do. This is God building the house through us.

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 the [his] beloved.* It could also be translated something like: *...for God provides all that we need even while we sleep.* This is

a call to let go of anxiousness and the fretfulness that wastes our lives and does no one any good. It is a call to inner peacefulness in the midst of our activity, our work. One of my major spiritual challenges is just at this point. Anxiety. Worry. Fretfulness. Lying awake at night with that cold, hard feeling of dread or fear about something or other. I came across a psychological term years ago when I was searching for a name to put on this thing I and many others experience--*hypervigilance*. It is a condition found in those suffering post traumatic stress disorder. Once while hiking with a friend in the congregation I was serving, I noticed, since he was in front of me, that he looked intently at the trail, from side to side, as though looking for something. As an officer, he had led patrols through the fields and jungles of Vietnam, and he confided in me that he still had the habit of looking for trip wires. Yet I think hypervigilance is found in more general forms in many people in our society and culture. It means just what it says: being on alert all the time, fretting that if we drop our guard, everything will fall apart, that everything depends on us. The psalmist assumes that God IS watching over the city, so we can drop our hypervigilance.

Being full of pressure, tension, and anxiousness is not a spiritual virtue. Just the opposite. Jesus' teachings call us to completely trustful living. 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*. 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." Would you feel a little funny about that? Sort of like you were guilty of something? There is no spiritual virtue in running around with our tongues hanging out and being exhausted all the time. So, letting God build the house through us brings with it a companion spiritual dimension—resting in God. We can be very busy, doing hard inward and outward work out of our love of God, and at the same time be deeply at peace. That is the kind of life to which the psalm, and Jesus, calls us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a bright, rising star in theological and church circles. But he soon became unpopular with the staid churches in and around Boston. He thought that faith had nothing to do with 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 where he would spend two years observing and living life deeply, Thoreau 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.

Mark's gospel gives us a story 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. They were caught in religion.

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. They should give great sums and more, after all, because they have more than they need.

Jesus suddenly gets excited and calls his disciples over. Look there, he says, at that poor widow, just the sort of person the scribes and the wealthy take advantage of to create their own wealth. 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. Over the years, I have known those who have the most to give financially, but who complain the most in hard economic times and balk at

the suggestion that they tithe. I have also had the deep honor to know some who have very little materially, but who are consistently generous, do not complain about it 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 no one but Jesus might ever notice. She has let God build her very life as a temple.