

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we come to another Sunday. The week is draining; the week can disorient us. The week can point us toward other callings that aren't as worthy of our attention as you. We lose who we are in sight of all the pressures, responsibilities, concerns, and other temporary anxieties that cloud our vision. Reorient us, God of vision. Help our vision to be attuned to the matters that truly keep us healthy, around service, around family, around worship in word and deed. Here those things we have lifted up, those things that draw us into worry, into joy, into disorientation, and take us all up into your arms, loving parent, caring friend, ever-present teacher and companion.

We are builders, God, who seek to build each other and ourselves in the matters of faithfulness. Our work is hard and takes a lifetime, but we wish to do it well. Help us never to count the costs of building ourselves in the way of righteousness to you. Let us never cut corners or times when we can dig deeper and go further for a lifetime of crafting ourselves to be better and stronger. We do this not because you command us to be holy but because, God, you are holy, and for us to follow you means that we seek to be like you, as much as we possibly can. We pray all these things in the name of the master builder who teaches us faithfulness time and again, Jesus the Christ, as we pray together his prayer, saying...

SERMON

There's a term for trying to do something useless. It's called "building a house of cards." Have you ever tried to build a house of cards? To be quite honest, I've never seen the appeal, but it can be one of those fun things to do when you have extra time or need a break. It doesn't take any real work. If you do it to create a respectable structure, try again. It takes a long time to get everything exactly where you want it. Even then, the job isn't

finished; you need to consistently reinforce the weak structure. You have to watch out for the slightest bit of pressure one way or another: it will tumble. The bottom line is that it's weak! It makes you wonder, what's really the point of building a house of cards? It makes you want something that does last, that stands tests of time. In other words, we want put real work into a real project that won't fall down like a house of cards in a gust of wind.

Last week, we discussed the issues of the Corinthians in Paul's first letter, and this week we return to the same text but an earlier place. The message is nonetheless poignant and appropriate. The Corinthian church was, once again, a church in desperate trouble. Before we have the momentous chapter on unconditional love, we have a discussion on breaking up factions and growing to maturity. The entire focus of this scripture is around building, starting with a foundation and then working up. We want to avoid at all costs the fallacy of building a house of cards in this life. Let's look at the image that Paul crafts, take all the components apart to find how it applies for us today, and end with what it means to destroy the temple of God.

I myself have little in the way of craftsmanship talent. I can't even build a house of cards. I mean, I can make one heck of a LEGO model, but my grandfather, my mother's dad, was quite the craftsman. He grew up to be a carpenter, and what a carpenter he was. I did not get to see him in action very much, but I did get to see many of his creations. Before he passed in 1996, he made the cabinets for the kitchen in my home, and they showed nothing but professional touch. The edges were exact; the texture was uniform. Throughout the years, his work was validated in how it lasted, up until the time when it was time to do a complete kitchen overhaul. Even then, the frame of the kitchen counters remained, for it was still of great use. In other words, the work of a craftsperson reflects something about

them. If you just throw something together, it will not last the trials of time. If it is too rigid, it will break and crumble when it is hit just the right way. If it is too fluid, it will not stand well and crumble without any pressure. It requires work, hard work, to get it well made, and there is no room to cut corners. If this is so for a true, brick-and-mortar building, how much more so is it for the life of the Christian.

In the form of a building, Paul is talking to the church about their work and how they grow into a faithful, well-rounded people. This passage is immediately preceded by the argument against taking sides, creating division. "I belong to Apollos," say some. "I belong to Paul," say others. Even others may claim Peter. All irrelevant, says Paul; what matters is unity under the Gospel, for we all follow Jesus. What comes next, though, is that the proof is in the pudding. We follow Jesus, but there must be more to the story; there must be greater proof and standing in the Gospel life.

As we're considering a building, the first thing we need is a cornerstone. A house of cards has no cornerstone; maybe that's why it falls so easily. The cornerstone is the anchor, the place where the weight of the building rests. It's where the building begins. What makes a good cornerstone? Something solid. Something firm. Something that can be built upon, that will hold up the rest of the building well. The first part is the foundation: Paul's message of grace in Jesus Christ, says the New Interpreter's Commentary. All of these things describe our faith in Jesus Christ, for Christ is our cornerstone. Nevertheless, a cornerstone is not the building. The cornerstone is the beginning of the building. In the same way, our faith in Jesus Christ is not the be-all and end-all of the Christian life; it is the beginning. Paul says: "Each builder must choose with care how to build on it...Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood or straw – the

work of each builder will become visible...and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.” Faith in Christ allows us to build, to craft, to energize us for the work of the Christian life. I feel bothered when I hear the Christian life as devoted to faith in Christ alone, when for us and for Paul, that was the beginning point. He speaks of the Corinthians as “infants in Christ,” fed with milk, not with solid food. This is a big problem; infants in Christ are stuck at the level of the cornerstone. While that is good for one part of our lives, it cannot be the focus of our lives of faithfulness. When all that matters is faith in Christ, we’re stuck on what’s happening on the inside when there is much to do with our actions; Paul knows they have faith in Christ, but that faith is not leading to faithful living. Our faith in Christ is the entrance that leads to a life that proclaims this faith in a myriad of ways. In the same way, the building only begins with the cornerstone but grows to larger and more mature things.

Like a good building, the Christian life must be multifaceted. Imagine moving into a house without something vital. For instance, imagine moving into a house without a kitchen or a bathroom. It’s obviously not functional. It can be a small house, but if it does not have what is vital to live, then we cannot live fully. In the same way, the Christian life calls us to have a multifaceted life and faith. If life is only about scripture reading or prayer, then we will find that our houses aren’t really functional. We craft a house that has only one room, and not much space in it at that. We are cramped in, doing much to learn but not taking that learning anywhere at all. On the other hand, if our houses are built with everything except scripture reading and prayer, it’s like building a house without a kitchen. We have no way to adequately feed ourselves, for our building has no means of sustaining and growing into faithful Christians. The building must have space for many rooms, many

facets for living out the Christian calling, or we will soon find that our buildings are too confining; there is no room to expand, to grow into understanding the fullness of Christ's calling. When we take in the fullness of Christ's ministry, we see all the ways in which we are called to make our houses into places of real life.

This passage continues with an important statement: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?" Again, we are limited by our English, says the Texts for Preaching commentary. When you learn another language, you come to learn the importance of the plural you, as in "y'all." If I say, "You are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you," you might be wondering, "Who's he talking to? Is that really me?" or it may sound like the Christian life is all about the individual, and that's not faithful. On the other hand, if I say, "Y'all are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in y'all," it's much more clear. This passage is about the community of the church. As we said last week, this was a church that had become about elitism: only if you had the correct qualifications could we let you among our fellowship. It's a church of exclusive membership, not open arms, open minds, and open doors, as the United Methodist slogan puts it so well. Paul is not mincing words when he takes down the sentiment with a pounding of his own. "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and y'all are that temple." In other words, be holy.

Our reading from Leviticus puts that into perspective. If God's temple is holy, if we together are God's temple, then we are to be holy. "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." We do that by the rest of the passage, seeing that it reminds us to take care of ourselves and others. These Levitical codes are not necessarily something we want to abide by anymore, but they provide a course from which we can extrapolate faithfulness.

We can use them as a guide as to what we can do and be in this world, just like much of the bible. Don't glean your whole field but leave some for those who have nothing to eat. Treat others as you would want to be treated. Live justly. I like how one should not hate in your heart anyone of your kin. The remedy and response is simple: reprove your neighbor, to make known your quarrel, or you will be the guilty one. Not only is that good advice for living with one another, it is good advice for just staying healthy. Only then can we get to the last part: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." As the podcast Sermon Brainwave put it, these are not commands for the sake of commands; we are reminded with the ongoing refrain, "I am the LORD" for a reason. It means that we are called to build our buildings, to follow these commands because God is who God is, not because we do what God wants. If we are going to serve our God, we are called to be accountable to God for who God is, and this is a heavy but honorable calling as a community. But always keep in the back of your mind: there is grace.

The calling is easily said: keep building. Our houses are never complete. No matter how we build them, the key is good, hard work, work that will allow the building to hold even through time and trouble with flexibility but with firmness. A healthy house is one that is never left unexamined but one that is reinforced, that is improved, that is kept at its best. Why should our lives be any different? The work we put in now will pay off consistently throughout our lives, and we should not squander any effort in keeping the structures good and healthy, both individually and communally, for we are the temple of God together. What a magnificent and difficult calling, just like the rest of the Christian Life! Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.