

Unless God Builds the House

Psalm 127:1-2
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Psalm 127 offers a sobering thought: unless God builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Of course, the same can be said for a pot of stew prepared at a soup kitchen: unless God is the chef, those who stir the pot stir in vain. The same can be said for a medical mission: unless God is the Inoculator, those who give the shots immunize in vain.

So, for all of you heading out on mission trips today, I hope you have a T-shirt in God's size, because God will be driving with you, bunking in with you at night, working side by side with you by day, ministering with you hour by hour. Otherwise, the work you do will be robbed of its full impact.

When students or adults or boards or committees return from a mission project in Hartford or Boston or Portland, Maine, I always ask them where they encountered God. In almost every case, it's not in the carrots used to make the supper; it's in the conversation with the woman enjoying the stew. In almost every case, it's not in the nails and power saws; it's in rubbing elbows with the new home owner. In almost every case, it's not in the snow or in the snow shovels, it's in the stories we hear; it's in the gratitude expressed; it's in the joy communicated between two human hearts.

I have placed a photograph on the communion table of the day of the worst of the bad snow storms we endured last winter. My driveway accumulated 32 inches of snow that day. Shoveling my way downhill, I had reached the two thirds point, but I had also reached the exhaustion point. That's when the miracle happened.

Seven vehicles pulled up at 70 Homestead Drive. Eighteen youth and a few adults piled out with snow blowers and shovels and enthusiasm. They came to my rescue! They did a mountain of work. Call it mission work! But they did more than show me their work skills; they showed me their compassion. They talked with me. We laughed a bit. For me, it was as if one of the parables of the Kingdom of God had been transliterated from the pages of the Bible to my driveway! Yes, it was a mob of people from South Church who showed up, but I believe it was God who tossed the snow over the high drifts. Thus, the labor was not in vain; it deepened the love among us.

Unless God builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. This is why every church event, no matter how grandiose, no matter how routine, when begun with prayer, when begun with God at the helm, is bound to change the lives of everyone involved. Whether it's a stewardship campaign or a living crèche or a knitted shawl or a silent auction or the assembling of the monthly newsletter or a visit to a home-bound friend, when God is invited to be the energizing force, it's like sprinkling Super Grow on tomato plants! The yield is astounding.

In Psalm 127, the word 'house' can be a metaphor referring to a relationship. To build a house can mean 'to build a friendship' or 'to build a partnership' or 'to build a community'. It can refer to that sacred relationship between a Confirmation student and a sponsor, or between an apprentice and a mentor, or between a Palestinian and a Jew, or between a mother and a daughter. You get the idea. Friendships are so sacred. Unless God is allowed a hand in building the friendship, those who would bond with each other labor somewhat in vain.

When we were learning French in Middle School, our teacher was Monsieur Sharr. He explained the word for 'you' is 'vous.' He then explained that when a relationship has progressed to a certain level of intimacy, the two people may agree to use the word 'tu' instead of 'vous.' Tu connotes a deeper connection. As middle schoolers, we could hardly wait to try out this new vocabulary on a special friend. Now, on reflection, I see that the way to move from the distant 'vous' to the more intimate 'tu' is by acknowledging the presence of God in the other. When I see the face of God in Matt's face or in Jane's face, we move from 'vous' to 'tu'; we move from being acquaintances to being spiritual friends. Unless God builds the house, the relationship; those who build it may be laboring in vain.

Our South Church mission board has just renewed its partnership with the Sioux YMCA in western South Dakota. With God at the helm, they are building a 'house' at the Leslie Marrowbone Summer Camp down along the Cheyenne River. I say 'house' but it's really a tepee! And there, on the Reservation, tepee means home; it means hearth; it means the security that comes with a loving family. Our mission board and the Sioux YMCA, in God's name, are building a house.

Leslie Marrowbone was a high school student in 1977. He was a Marc Feldmann kind of a guy. He loved life! He was a brilliant scholar, a marathon runner, on his way to Olympic fame when he died tragically in a car accident crossing the Missouri River bridge. The YMCA named the summer camp in his honor. Since then, children from Cherry Creek and Iron Lightning and Bear Creek and Thunder Butte and Red Scaffold and Bridger have been experiencing the sweetness of life one week each summer as they become part of a house, a tepee, made by God. It is so wonderful to see these Lakota children learning to love themselves, to love their neighbors, to love the earth, and to love God.

Those who have labored and are laboring now to build the Leslie Marrowbone Camp have not labored in vain because God has been the primary builder.

Psalm 127 was written down about 3000 years ago in King David's realm. It likely was sung at campfires for hundreds of years before then. The Psalm carries forward an ancient wisdom that is totally relevant today. "Unless God builds the house, those who build it, labor in vain." This is what I wanted to say to the church this morning as we launch these three mission trips out into the world in the greatest of hope. Amen!