

Acts 10:44-48
John 15: 9-17

“Building and Growing”

St. Francis of Assisi had a Godly vision. “Francis, rebuild the church.” Unsure of what God meant, Francis chose a ruined church near where he lived.

He recruited a whole variety of people to help.

Some just came to watch, and before they knew it they were mixing cement.

Others could not lift a single stone without help, but that worked out, since it led them to meet more people and they worked together ... and together they were stronger.

To most of them building the church became more important than finishing it.

When it was completed at last, Francis’s church did not stand as a shelter from the world; rather, it stood as a reminder that the whole world is God’s house. And this whole throng of fellow builders were God’s children.

Building a church is a huge undertaking. An awesome challenge. Two or three years after I was called by the Presbyterian Child Welfare Agency to develop a residential treatment center for neglected and dependent children in Ohio, I was given a set of audio tapes ... the complete book “The Pillars of the Earth” by Ken Follett.

The story is set in 12th century England, among people who were so poor a pig was worth a life, medicine was rejected as sin – or witch craft. And church leaders poisoned one another. Those were very difficult times, indeed.

The central character of the story, young Tom Builder was facing tough times. He had been building a castle, but that project had come to a sad end, leaving Tom and his family destitute. Yet now he was determined to build for God a beautiful home. He muses, “This cathedral will be more than just stone, wood, nails and mud. It will take the earth with all its heaviness and

transform it into possibilities ... reaching for the light, which is hope ... for the light, which is God.

I spend a lot of time in church/in churches. I look at church buildings. I visit churches. Most days when I am here at Head of Christiana I spend some time here in this sanctuary.

I find myself thinking of all the people who have sat in these church spaces through generations. And I like to think about how each church was built. There is one thing most all share: it took a long time, sometimes centuries, to build these churches.

For some, like Head of Christiana, there was a fire. Perhaps even a second fire. Everything destroyed. So the work began anew. Perhaps with a larger plan. Instead of wood, there is brick or stone. And through generations, sections were added, rubble cleared from the basement to turn it into a meeting space and a kitchen. Another generation builds on spaces for Christian education and bathrooms.

It took centuries to build many of the churches we admire. Some are not complete yet, and then almost all of them are being repaired, rebuilt, and restored. Emerging generations consider what will better serve our needs.

What will help us accomplish our mission to the community around us ... to the world?

What will best convey the glory and beauty of God to our community ... to the world?

What will best position us most faithfully for coming generations?

And I have come to understand deeply that this task of building a church is really never complete.

The twentieth-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."

But the church is the people, isn't it? Not the building. Church buildings are what's wrong in the first place, some insist. All those lavish buildings, with high vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows and exquisitely carved wood are a distraction from what Jesus taught and a monumental waste of time and money. There are always people talking like that. Someone is

often counting the cost of building churches and calculating how many hungry people would be fed if the money had been used for that instead.

There is merit to that criticism, of course. Constructing and then maintaining the building can be a distraction from the mission of the church; a church can develop an “Edifice Complex” so profound that a subtle transference occurs and some begin to think that the building is the church.

And yet part of an honest critical analysis of the church needs to include the positive and good things that happen through the church in the world: the hungry fed because the church is there, the homeless sheltered. Think of this: Hospitals ... Hospice care Hospitality permeates our lives for they tangibly express the way of Jesus. And no one has ever been able to assign economic value to the way a church expresses the heart and soul of the community. A community’s best and noblest instincts.

I have two conclusions. First, Jesus called his followers not away from institutions and buildings, but into them. And into them with a purpose—Jesus called his followers to the synagogue and to the temple, where they spent a lot of time. Look, it’s impossible to enlist Jesus in the effort to belittle institutions. He took institutions of his day— the synagogue and temple—very seriously. And so Jesus calls followers into churches today to be faithful there,

to be in the world as only a church building is,
to go out from the building and live for him and then
return there for comfort and encouragement
and to say “thank you, loving God” joined
together with all the other followers.

It is not entirely true that the church is the people, not the building. The truth, it seems to me, is that the church is the people and the building, however grand and glorious or modest ... the church in which we gather to pray and say “thank you,”

... the church from which we go every week into the world to live for Jesus.

And the church to which we will return following Sundays, in gratitude.

That's the first conclusion. And the second conclusion is that building a church is a task that is never completed but handed down from one generation to the next. Just as has been happening here at Head of Christiana.

One of the most remarkable things Jesus ever said is **“You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last.”** That comes as Jesus is talking to his disciples at the table of the Last Supper. He is summing up ... he is issuing final instructions, because Jesus seems to know that this will be his last night on earth. So right in the middle of this sacred occasion: **“You did not choose me; I chose you. Go, bear fruit that will last.”**

It is a haunting, powerful idea that in ways we have difficulty talking about or even understanding: we are **chosen, called, appointed by God ... to bear fruit ...to make a difference ... a lasting difference.**

It's hard to see it or know it at the time, but looking back there is a guiding purpose, a gracious intent, at work in our lives.

It is not because of anything in us or about us.

All we can say is to confess that somehow God has been the leading actor in the story of our lives.

All we can say about it, without sounding foolish or arrogantly pious is, at the end of the day, “thank you, loving God”

And continue the work.

It's not that God has rearranged all the details of our lives.

Rather, It's more of a consistent nudging, pointing, showing a possibility here, an opening there, encouraging, strengthening, nagging, persistently until we answer; with a gracious, loving, attentiveness; an acceptance.

Gratitude. “Thank you, Lord Jesus.”

When I ponder those ancient European cathedrals and churches. When I consider the grand church where I was reared, Pine Street Presbyterian church in Harrisburg ... Their slogan is “The Capitol is next door to us”. At one point, probably 25 years ago, more environmentally aware, they did away with styrofoam cups and bought mugs for coffee hour, and other uses. They

were handsome mugs featuring a graphic of the church and the words, “The Capitol is Next Door to Us.”

They discovered that some were taking the mugs home, they liked them so much. The church bought more ... they found people were taking them to work ... They were conversation starters. They allowed people to talk about their church. Unplanned and unannounced, they recognized that they had embarked on the best outreach campaign ever.

The first church I served as pastor was in the heart of eastern Kentucky, Buckhorn, KY ... An amazing log cathedral the people of the community had built themselves back in the 1920's. Let's see ... the Kentucky state capitol was definitely not next to the Buckhorn church. Rather, the log cathedral was next to trees and hills and people scattered up Squabble Creek, and over to Otter creek, and down the middle fork of the Kentucky River.

Annually the church receive tons of used clothing from across the US. Most every day, in the basement of the house next door to the church, several of the church sorted through old clothes and a day each week opened for people of the community to come and select clothes for family and friends. And crowds came.

People of the surrounding area called it the “rag house.” Even some members ... even some who volunteered there called it “The rag house.” Few were happy with that name – not proud of that approach. So the vision was to transform the rag house into the Community Help Center ... where carefully sorted used clothing was displayed ... and we found some old sewing machines and men repaired them ... and kept them running ... and we acquired sewing patterns. And women created their own patterns and taught sewing ... and how to replace zippers and linings. And then the Community Help Center got into cooking. And a man taught how to build a sanitary privy. And another how to build screen doors and windows. And the rhythm intensified.

And the amazing thing about this was you could hardly tell the Buckhorn church members from non-members. Together, people taught and learned and created and enjoyed the times together.

The Buckhorn church with the community sponsored a health fair – booths with education about heart health, balanced meals, tooth care, family planning, movies on health care, displays, music, and all types of fun for young and old. As a result of the organization and planning, people, united began thinking and planning for a community health clinic. Actually, it was a natural, for the nearest doctor was an hour away and over six mountains. It took years, but today there is a clinic in Buckhorn, staffed either by a physician or a nurse practitioner. Yes, Reinhold Niebuhr is correct, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.”

When I ponder the remarkable story of Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, established over 300 years ago in these headwaters, I believe there is something of God’s will and intent going on here down through the years—that we, and those who preceded us, are chosen by Jesus Christ to be his church in this place, in this time, called to love and serve...to imagine. To have visions...to dream dreams. —and nothing is more important, more pregnant with hope, more resonate with the love of God, than this one: to keep building and growing Christ’s church.

During the Christmas season, 2013, Christmas carolers from Head of Christiana visited Marion Shirkey at Millcroft nursing center. We sang at her door and then pushed her in her wheelchair down the hallway ... and we sang all the way. This was especially unforgettable to me for I got too close to the hand rails on the wall and Marion’s hand got caught between her wheelchair handle and the hand rail. The singing came to a stop and we struggled to release Marion’s hand. Well, her seat lifted and lowered with a device and a staff person stepped forward and Marion was released. I wheeled Marion back to her room, and as I left, Marion said, “My Church is Head of Christiana ... and it is in my heart forever. It’s not perfect ... no church is perfect ... but it is in my heart forever.”

The church is not perfect—not this one, not any church.

But for 2,000 years it has been the institutional expression of the awesome conviction that the love of God came among us in Jesus Christ, and that God’s love continues to come into the

world not in an abstract, purely spiritual sense, but through an institution—the church.

And that God calls men and women to live in love, through the church, and calls the church itself to love and serve the world as Jesus did.

And so whatever your status this morning – recent member ... long time member ... never a member ... a long lost member — I ask you this morning to consider seriously the idea that the church is God's way of bringing a bit of the kingdom of God into the world. The reign of God among us.

And further, that God calls you and me to be part of it—to love and serve. To welcome and to extend grand hospitality. To spread the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.