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“Who Is Building God’s House?”

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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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2 Samuel 7:1–14a; Psalm 89:20–29; Mark 6:30–34. 53–56

This wonderful story of David and his exchange with God through the prophet Nathan is full of irony and humor and even a little sarcasm. It is all about house building. We know about house building; we build them, we live in them, we maintain them. We are currently living through a housing crisis—people’s homes are being foreclosed, and people are struggling with an economy that is based around housing and its implications for all the industries that service them. In the exchange between God and David, the topic wasn’t about real estate bubbles. It was all about who is building whose house for whom, when. Ultimately, the story teaches us the fundamental truth that we have claimed all through our lives: **that God is in charge. But we keep thinking we are.**

Many years ago, when I was in graduate school in Rome, I had a simple experience of a power imbalance, doing a transaction as simple as going to the movie theater. This really dates me: the movie was Dr. Zhivago, David Lean’s famous masterpiece of the Russian Revolution. It was in the 1960s, and we were going to the movies near the Piazza Barberini, and I plopped down 1,500 lire to buy my ticket. The ticket was 1,200 lire, about a dollar, and the lady in the ticket box hands me back five pieces of hard candy for change. Now, in Italy at the time, change was hard to come by. I had experienced this before in bars and other places. You would receive pieces of candy as part of your change for whatever you were purchasing. But in this case, I felt like I deserved my 300 lire in hard cash, not in hard candy. So I protested, and the lady in the ticket box turned to me and said,

“Am I going to the movie, or are you going to the movie?” I took my hard candy, took the ticket, and went to the movie because I wanted to go to the movie. The message of power imbalance was my take away. I have used often similar words with my family about who is in charge: “Am I driving the car, or are you driving the car?” when Sheila is telling me how to drive. I couldn’t help but think of that experience, about going to the movie, when I reread and recaptured this wonderful story of irony with David and God, the Lord of Hosts.

David is comfortable. He has just beaten back all his enemies. He has built a house of cedar for his home. He is beginning to think, maybe it is time now to do something about a house for God that made this all possible. He says to Nathan, who serves as his prophet, “I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” In a very magnanimous gesture, he wants to build a great temple for God. So Nathan says, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you” (2 Samuel 7:2–3). As you know, it is dangerous to fall asleep at night when the Lord is involved, and Nathan gets this message: “Go and tell my servant, David, ‘Are *you* the one to build *me* a house to live in? I don’t think so. I have not lived in a house for years, since the very beginning of my relationship with the patriarchs and Moses and the prophets. From Israel, I took them from Egypt to this very day. My presence has been in tabernacles and in tents, and wherever I have moved among all the people of Israel, I never asked them to build me a house of cedar” (cf. 2 Samuel 7:4–7). He reminds David too that it was God who made him King in the first place. David was only a shepherd-boy when the Lord took charge of his destiny and began to make him a powerful leader.

So in the midst of this message to David through Nathan, God makes a counterproposal—“I’m the one who does the building around here.” He says, “You want to build *me* a house? I’m going to build *you* a house.” And of course, this is a powerful metaphor for the House of David, which as we know becomes the dynasty, the line of succession that leads to our salvation in Christ Jesus, our Lord. “I will make you a great name, and I will declare to you that the Lord will make you a house. And I will raise up your offspring after you from that house, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. I shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (cf. 2 Samuel

7:12–16).

What is the takeaway message; what is the lesson, the teaching point that 2 Samuel is trying to teach us for this day and for every day? Truly, we get the point that God is in charge; he is the one who does the building; we don't do the building, even though we sometimes think we do. The message is not only that God is in charge, but the only way we come to grips with that reality is through our conviction of the way in which we conduct the work of our hands. I don't think the message is simply that God is in charge and all is right with the world, as if God, in some way, is manipulating and managing every aspect of our lives, as if God determines this person gets cancer, this person doesn't; this person lives in a house that is owned, and this person lives in a house that is rented.

The message is respectful of our human agency. We have been entrusted with intelligence and free will, and we are being asked to have the work of our hands blessed in all that we do. We know that can turn to the dark side as we've noticed of late in Colorado and in Syria, where people, for whatever reason that enters into the evilness of their hearts, commit massacres that stun the international community. It is not all the great and wonderful capacity that we have to shape and transform a world for good, but the opposite happens as well.

The point for the Christian community is that if God is in charge, who respects at the same time our agency to do good things, how is it then that we can balance our acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and at the same time respect the way in which we are to have our works blessed in our daily lives?

There is an old adage that goes something like this: "Work as if everything depends on you. Pray like everything depends on God." I think it captures the truth of the message we hear today. We are not to give up our responsibilities and our involvement in shaping, as a mandate, as a mission of our Christian faith, to make this world a better place. The way in which we are a community of love and service as the church, exemplified simply by the month of service that we've just completed, is an illustration of the way in which we are called to allow the work of our hands serve those in need.

At the same time, we are not going to recognize that this is God's work and not just simply ours unless we are a community, not only of love and service, but a community at worship and prayer. It is precisely the reason why we gather Sunday after Sunday, even during the heat of the summer, to be reminded of that fundamental truth. In our prayer, we recognize our dependency on God, and the words that come to our lips immediately are words of gratitude. I think it is through the recognition that all life is gift, the spark of our existence is God-given, that even our ability and capacity to change and transform the world by the meager efforts that we offer are inspired by a loving God, and ultimately, blessed by that God who is in charge of all things.

So I invite you, then, from the reading of 2 Samuel and even the story about Jesus, who has pity and compassion on his people because they need good shepherds, to take away the fundamental truth that God is in charge, but in the midst of your work, and in the midst of the blessing of the work of our hands. This awareness is acute when you are a people at prayer and ultimately can respond in gratitude for all that God does and is for us.

This is really a stewardship message. When you come forward to offer your time and talent to serve, when you come forward to offer the gifts of your offering for this day and the gifts for Hunger for Change, all of these are simple illustrations of the way which we give of ourselves to a God who loves us, transforms us, and does all of the building of our lives and community. As we respond in gratitude and in prayer, remember the other Psalm, Psalm 127, which begins: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1). Be convinced of God's building in your lives, and respond to that gift with your own gratitude through prayer.