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## “What’s Building?!”

A sermon by Cheryl Barton Henry

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

October 23, 2016

2 Samuel 7:1–18; Psalm 84:1–4; Luke 1:30–33

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I bet you know this one!

Join me if you do.

*Here is the church.  
Here is the steeple.  
Open the doors  
and see all the people!*

*You can have a building  
and you can have a steeple.  
But you can’t have a church  
without all the people!*

As I approached our Old Testament lesson from 2 Samuel for today,  
that child’s hand play kept coming back to me.

I remember doing it with my mom as a child.

I loved trying to remember which way to thread my fingers –  
in or out –

so that it came out right with the rhyme.

Fingers on the inside for the first time.

Fingers on the outside for the second time.

It's funny how some things we learn early as children  
grow too simple for us as adults,  
but how other small learnings,  
like that little "Here is the church. Here is the steeple." poem  
can grow deeper in meaning.

In today's scripture, David, all settled into a nice house of his own,  
rested for the time being from his enemies,  
he tells his pastor, the prophet Nathan  
that he's been looking at houses.  
His own lovely place  
and God's rather homely tent.  
And he has come to a conclusion.  
God needs a nicer house! Maybe a nice cedar one would do. Yes!

Nathan, like most Pastors  
knows his wealthiest,  
most powerful member, David,  
pretty well.  
It behooves him to do so, of course.  
But here's the thing.  
Wealth and power aside,  
Nathan actually likes David.  
He trusts David even.  
Nathan can see that God's hand is on David's life and  
Nathan feels good about David.  
Good enough that when David proposes to build God a house,  
Nathan doesn't think twice about it.<sup>1</sup>

This is obviously a good idea!  
"Go ahead and build God a house," he tells David.  
"The Lord is with you!"

Nathan, like all pastors and prophets,

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these ideas came to me from the website "Excellence In Preaching" where Dr. Scott Hozee in his July 13, 2015 gives comments that he says are heavily influenced by Eugene Peterson, [Leap over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians](#). San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997, pp. 160-61. Their adaption, for the purpose of this sermon, are my own.

who love and admire the Davids of this world,  
of course, should have thought twice  
when answering on behalf of God.

Still, God gets to Nathan fast enough.

That very night, God comes to Nathan  
with a word for David on the whole house matter.

God says to Nathan,

“You know that house David wants to build for me?”

“Yeah . . . I don’t want that so much –  
at least not from David.”

“Don’t you think I know what a house of cedar means?”

It means I’ll be pinned in.

Tents are more my style.

Have I ever given any reason for you or David to think otherwise?

Since Egypt, haven’t you experienced me as the God on the go?  
Moving. In the middle of things.

Tents are my style.

And besides, I have other things plans for David.

I want him to be the prince over my people.

I want to give him rest from his enemies.

And more than all that, I want him

to get my people Israel

properly planted.

If there is going to be any house building for anyone,

God tells Nathan to tell David,

“It is I, YHWH, who is going to build a home for David.

Not the other way around.

David is not to build a cedar house for me.

I am going to build a house for David!

And it’s not going to be made of cedar either.

Rather, the house YHWH the Lord of Host is going to build  
is going to be a house of people.

A family.

A bloodline

from David down through the generations  
through whom God will establish a throne

that with his steadfast love

that will establish THE kingdom – God’s kindgom.

The kingdom that will be Forever.

God tells Nathan to tell David,

that a physical house for God in time will be built,

by David’s son,

but it will not be built by David’s hands.

David has other lessons to learn than carpentry.

During this year, as we celebrate 100 years of  
the beauty and respite that our sanctuary offers to us  
and to our community,

and as on this Children’s Sabbath,

as we look from one generation to the next  
to understand our children

in relationship to the Kingdom of steadfast love (*hesed*)

God is building,

how should we hear this story of David?

What do we make of its paradoxes of truth

and the twists of fate it tells?

Well, one thing is certain,

buildings are strange paradoxes to us, are they not?

They motivate us in some pure and

also some not so pure ways.

We do not know all that motivated David

to want to build God a house.

Perhaps he was simply struck by the injustice  
he saw when he looked at his lovely house  
and God's shabby tent.

Maybe David, as many faithful since him  
who have built buildings to God's glory,  
truly felt grateful to God for all that God had done  
and wanted an outward manifestation of that gratitude.

But, let's admit it,  
there could have been some less than sincere  
motives in King David as well.

We get a hint of some of these less than pure motives  
from the very words YHWH –  
who always saw the heart of David –  
tells Nathan.

Did David want to be sure God would be  
exactly where he could find God when he wanted him  
and did he think a temple would pin God in?  
Could David have wanted God to stay put in his house  
and a little less hands-on in David's ruling of Israel?  
And did David, as any king would, imagine  
that a cedar house for God would impress the neighbors  
who seeing how strong and beautiful God's house was  
might assume the same about, well . . . about David.

All of us have pure and impure reasons  
for wanting to put God in a building, don't we?

I can confess that I was a bit taken back by my own  
hubris over our beautiful sanctuary  
when I saw the astoundingly beautiful wedding pictures  
from Abi and Derek's wedding!  
It was all I could do to not say in my Facebook postings:  
See the obviously superior church I go to.  
Look at that beautiful crafted wooden pew

the happy couple is sitting in!  
And can you possibly deny that God is not in the stained glass light  
of that window that falls on them so lovely in that picture  
of the happy couple?

Today's scripture story  
reminds us to put our God buildings (our temples and sanctuaries)  
in their place.

For God truly does not need our buildings.  
And God certainly doesn't want  
us to care for them above him or the purposes of God's love  
they serve.

In today's lesson,  
God wants us to understand, first and foremost,  
that we are the buildings  
God most desires to build.

Us. We ourselves.  
People like you and me  
and all God's children out there in the world.  
God wants our feeble bodies,  
our homely little lives,  
our straggly tents to live in.

We are the beautiful dwellings  
that God most cares to inhabit and improve.

C.S. Lewis once wrote about it this way:

*Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new*

*wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.<sup>2</sup>*

God intends to come and live in us!

In today's scripture,  
we are reminded that God wants a living flesh house.

"Gather us in!" we sang this morning,  
"fire of love in our flesh and our bone!"

God is building in us  
a house that is bigger and more grand  
than even this beautiful sanctuary can ever portray.  
God is building in us a whole kingdom, in fact,  
of God's steadfast love  
established for everyone and for always.

God is building a legacy of love in us.  
Love that is to build as we pass it on.  
Love that is to beget love  
that is to beget love, that is to beget love.

And this vision of a house built of God's steadfast love  
is a dream we could never have dreamed up ourselves fully . . .  
for our dreams are so limited next to God's vision for us.

And this vision of this dream  
of God's love and hope is on to be passed down.  
One to be built  
from one generation to the next.

And here is where I have to confess  
that I'm going off the scholarly grid . . .  
As I looked at today's story,

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis. [Mere Christianity](#).

I couldn't help but think of David's next generation.  
That would have been Solomon, David's son.  
Solomon is the one who God says WILL build God a house.

That would have been the "Song of Solomon" Solomon.  
That Solomon would write  
(or at least we would attribute him to writing):

"If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned."

Now we know that Solomon was writing that to his lover at the time  
and that is why this passage is often used at weddings,  
but it came to me this week in relationship  
to this passage from 2 Samuel to ask  
"Could Solomon have absorbed this truth  
from this very story of his father, David?"

"If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned."

Did Solomon know  
about this time  
his father tried to offer his wealth (the building of a cedar house)  
for God's love,  
and it was scorned?

"If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned."

Love and love's lessons gets passed down.  
One generation to another.

A few weeks ago, Amy Dillon, in her role as deacon,  
was to deliver the morning's worship flowers  
to shut-ins in the congregation.



She told me it is her habit to take her  
children, Noah and Rory, with her to deliver the flowers.

Unfortunately,  
it was one of those Sundays when, for whatever reason,  
there were no flowers placed in the sanctuary for worship  
(Nothing wrong with that!  
*Seriously, nothing wrong with that.*)

However, it left Amy wondering what to do?  
She liked the interaction the flowers allowed her and the kids  
to have with shut-ins.

I ran into Amy after worship  
as she was brainstorming some options on the spot.

At first the brainstorming wasn't going so great.  
Maybe she could go buy flowers at the grocery store.  
I could tell she wasn't quite settled there.  
It took a while, but finally the Holy Spirit broke through,  
and she came to something  
that could not be bought.  
She remembered that Noah and Rory  
knew some songs from singing in the children's choir here at church.  
Could they bring song flowers to the shut-ins?

As I understood it, that was their plan.  
And I was going to tell you this tale of Amy's creativity and faith  
and how she was passing that along to her children.  
But when I checked in with Amy about using their story,  
she told me that that though this was their intention,  
something else happened.  
When they got to the Forest at Duke, they found  
the electricity was out.  
They couldn't find or get to the people they had hoped,  
but they did talk to some folks at hand.

So they ended up not singing that day,  
but they will in the future.  
But whether they sang or just visited,  
I think of the wisdom  
Amy taught Noah and Rory that day.  
The wisdom of a love that cannot be bought.  
A love like the sort Solomon spoke of,  
of the sort God wanted David and us to learn.  
The love of a church that is a people;  
a love that goes no matter if you get to do what is planned  
or see the people you thought you would.  
A love that trusts that in God's kingdom,  
nothing is lost, but all will be used for love's sake.

Sisters and brothers,  
God is building a kingdom of love among us.  
From one person to another and from generation to another . . .  
a kingdom of steadfast love.  
A house that is more than brick and mortar  
more even than biological kinship.

But lest it all seem so vague,  
let me assure you it is not!  
God has a plan for the building of his kingdom  
that is sure and steady.  
It is a plan that hear in a song we sing mostly at Christmas.  
It's in the third verse of "Once in Royal David's City,"  
a verse I used to sing to Sam every night:

*Jesus is our childhood pattern.  
Day by day, like us he grew.  
He was little, weak and helpless.  
Tears and joys, like us he knew.  
And he cares for all our sadness.  
And he shares in all our gladness.*

The house God's love builds has a pattern,  
and Jesus is its blueprint.

But here is the best part:  
that blueprint, that pattern  
is in God's hands and not ours!

The building God is building with and for us  
will come because God wants it to come.  
The kingdom of steadfast love will be built  
because God wants it built

*Here is the church.  
Here is the steeple.  
Open the door and see all the people.*

Christ is building a church and it will have people.  
It cannot be bought or built with our hands.

The church buildings we build may or may not have people,  
but Christ's church always has people.

And it comes as a gift, sisters and brothers.  
A pattern of love assembling with or without our help  
purely from the love God has for us.

A few weeks ago,  
one of our choir members said,  
"Maybe we should write consolation cards to people  
who don't make it into church this Sunday."

Worship is so good!  
Why would anyone deny themselves this building?  
It is a thing to marvel and be grateful for;  
an occasion to get on our knees and pray  
like David did that day when he finally got it,  
"Who am I, Lord God,

and of what significance is my family,  
that you have brought me this far?"

May we with David pray that grateful prayer,  
sisters and brothers.

May we with Solomon, David's dear son,  
declare to all lovers that would love truly,  
that love cannot be bought.

May we with Mary, and the angel Gabriel,  
be open and glad for God to use us in whatever way God sees fit  
to pass on the promise fulfilled in Jesus;  
to continue the pattern for establishing  
the kingdom of God's steadfast love.

And may Christ's love as it always has,  
and always will continue  
day by day to grow us all –  
adults and children from one generation to the next –  
into the people we are meant to be.

A people who love because we were first loved by our God who  
cares for all our sadness  
and shares in all our gladness.

God has from the beginning and will until the end.

And THAT's what is building, sisters and brothers!  
THAT's the kingdom coming.

Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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