

“Building Up the Body”
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40;
Matthew 5:38-48; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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Cleaning our family room last week, I stumbled upon one of my very favorite books from childhood, the Richard Scarry classic *What Do People Do All Day?* (I brought it to the mosh pit, in case the kids there want to see.) It describes all the workers in Busytown – from Mayor Fox to Lowly Worm – who work hard to make sure there’s enough food and houses and clothing for their families. “Some workers work indoors,” the book begins, “and some work outdoors.” The pictures show them at work in buildings you can see inside: the drug store, where a doggy pharmacist is filling a prescription . . . the dancing school, where a cat practices ballet . . . the home where a rabbit’s doing laundry. “Some work up in the sky,” like the mouse in his airplane. “Some work underground,” like the fox down the manhole. Everyone is a worker: the farmer who grows the food and the grocer who sells it . . . the tailor who sews their clothes and the blacksmith who makes their tools . . . the banker managing money, the parents fixing supper, the children willing to help. The book makes it clear that a community functions best when everyone is contributing to it.

There are several examples of specific projects and the way they get done. How a letter gets delivered. How a fire is put out. How a new road is made. I especially like the chapter on “Building a new house.” You have a power shovel to dig a hole for the foundation, and bricklayers to build it. There are carpenters to build the frame of the house, plumbers to attach water and sewer pipes to the main pipes under the street, electricians to lay the wires. You see mortar spread, nails pounded, dirt shoveled, paint brushed, and bathtubs put into place. It’s charming to notice how busy and happy everybody is as they work together on the house. There are smiles all around, amidst the hard but good labor, from the start of the project ‘til the buyer shows up, and the workers run to get their pay. Stiches the tailor is the new home-owner – he and his bus-full of rabbit children. Good thing they have a strong and sturdy house to live in.

In today’s text from 1 Corinthians, Paul compares the church to a building with the strongest imaginable foundation – Jesus Christ. The building is abuzz with workers, all laboring to build on that foundation to make a strong and spacious home for God. As with a house, where each worker’s contribution is important, and sloppy work over here will have a negative impact over there, so it is with the church. Each person involved in creating and sustaining a congregation is important and must take care with his or her work for the church to be well built.

A pastor named Kate Foster Connors, in an article about this text, wondered about the way Christians build on foundation of Christ. Consider, she says: what kind of footprint did Jesus leave for us to build upon? How can we carry his ministry through in every aspect of our life together? Are we showing his love in the way we talk to one

another and make decisions in our governing boards? Do we show his justice in the way that we spend our time and our money? Do we extend Christ's hospitality by involving the youngest and oldest members of the church in ministries that matter? Do we practice his acceptance, welcoming strangers into our midst? Are we building upon the strong and holy foundation Jesus provides?

Church members are at once the builders *and* the building itself. "You are God's temple," Paul says, speaking in the plural. "God's Spirit dwells in you" who are the church. God does not live in some big, empty sanctuary. Nor does God reside in any one of us alone. God dwells among the community, Paul says. God comes to us in a special way when we're gathered. *The community* is what we are called to build sturdy and strong. The community is the "place" God's Spirit comes to live.

In preparation for yesterday's Presbytery meeting, I spent some time reading the proposed revision to our Form of Government. This is a document meant to provide instructions for our "building" efforts, and toward the start of it, there's a description of Christ, our foundation, and the church, the body of Christ. It says:

In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ God reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. In Christ's name, therefore, the Church is sent out to bear witness to the good news of reconciliation with God, with others, and with all creation. In Christ the Church receives its truth and appeal, its holiness and its unity.

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world:

- ✦ The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.
- ✦ The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation [- a new beginning for all people and things.] The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.
- ✦ The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.¹

Faith, hope, and love – Paul speaks of those gifts, too, in his famous chapter on love: 1 Corinthians 13. "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." It's read at weddings most of the time, but Paul wrote it to a church – the Corinthian church, which was as contentious and divided as the Presbyterian Church can be at times. Yet it remains as true today as it was back then: Christ gives to the church all the gifts we need to be his body. Faith, hope, and love. They characterize the "footprint" he left us to build upon. And when our efforts are rendered with the faith, hope, and love

¹ F-1.0205 and the next paragraph, F-1.0301.

Christ offers, we accomplish the fourth thing the church is meant to do. We become a community of *witness*, pointing beyond ourselves to the good news of God's transforming grace in Jesus Christ.²

We'll talk a bit more about the work of the church when we receive new members in a moment. I want to leave you now with just a word . . . a word I've been told that John Brown (Ruth's dad, a former pastor of this church) used to say instead of goodbye. He said, "Courage." I can't know for sure, but I'm willing to bet that when John said "Courage" to members of this church, he meant it as the scriptures do – as *encouragement* to live and work with confidence that God has given us all we need to carry out God's mission, and the future (whatever it will be) is in God's hands. Courage.

About courage Marilyn Robinson once wrote, "Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave – that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing."³

In all your efforts to be useful and generous, building upon Jesus Christ, who is our shared foundation, I say to you, as my predecessor said: Courage!

² F-1.0301.

³ Marilynne, Robinson, *Gilead*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2004, 246.