

The House(hold) We're Called to Work (and Contribute) to Build

Psalms 127:1 and Matthew 10:5-13

September 03, 2017

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This is Labor Day weekend, which serves as a tribute to those who contribute to the work of the nation in multiple ways, because the sum of all the peoples' work and labor necessary to build the nation in all its parts is exceeded by the whole – the totality – of what is built: the community of the nation! As the saying goes, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” We learn this about our nuclear households. In my later elementary years, I began to learn about how “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” when my sister and brother and I had certain chores, such as clearing the table after breakfast and supper, such as hanging out the washed clothes on the clothes' line in the back yard, and gathering in the same clothes after they had dried. Our mom and dad did not usually clear the table when we were younger because one of the two was washing the dishes. Our mom and dad did not usually hang out the clothes or bring them in after the clothes dried because my dad was at work downtown and my mother was sleeping to recover from the previous night's work at the hospital and sleeping to be ready for the upcoming night. We each worked and made a contribution to the sum of the work needed to be accomplished for the household, learning over the years that our household was greater than any one person's work and task, and greater – as a whole and totality – than the sum of all those particular tasks the five of us were doing. We all had certain work to do, and roles to fill, but the household was greater still than all of our work and roles combined. Both with gifts and accomplishments and with shortcomings and failures in our tasks and our personalities, we were a household; and the household was greater than any of us as individuals; yet the household was never at its potential without the contributions and personalities of all of us together. “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Here in the first few days of September, First Presbyterian-Bryan is 12 weeks from celebrating our 150th anniversary as a church in this community and county. The 150 years are mostly in the past; the current day-by-day is present; and the future lies before us. The people of this congregation have come and gone – and continue to come and go – across the years with similarities and differences, while God is continually seeking to evolve from this church a witness to God's love embodied in Jesus Christ. It's very easy to get hung up on what God has done in the past, so much that we fail to value and appreciate what God is doing in the present on the way to a future we cannot see or know in this or any moment, but which future is unfolding even as we prepare to breathe our next breath. As God's people, we learn “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts;” and practicing on the parts, we contribute from our gifts, tasks, and caring.

I learned this in a new way this past summer while a member of the partnership team from First Presbyterian-Bryan serving about 20 miles outside of Quillabamba, Peru. The seminary being developed there is a school for Bible and ministry training which can also serve as a center for technical and vocational training AND for health advocacy and health care. It's set in a low range of the Andes Mountains where civilization has existed for thousands of years, where Presbyterian Christians have been engaged sharing God's love embodied in Jesus Christ for many years, and where a partnership with North American Presbyterians and First Presbyterian-Bryan has been on-going during the past decade. It didn't start with me showing up in late-July of 2017. When I arrived on that hillside, I saw about five pick-axes, nine shovels, and four wheelbarrows. Our work with several of the seminary students and church members from the surrounding region was to excavate an area for the foundation of a kitchen, adjacent to the building previously built by previous locals and visiting North American mission partners, including several from this church and with a high percentage of dollars from this church. I knew as soon as I stepped off the van that I had responsibility. One of those shovels and one of those wheelbarrows had my name on it for a few days; yet mine was only one role among many for a few days. The work of God's love embodied in Jesus Christ started before me and would continue after me. “The whole” both has been and is greater than the sum of the parts, including what I contribute and what you and anyone else contribute. Then, with what all can and do contribute, the movement toward the sum and the whole develops and evolves. When I stepped

off that van on that Saturday morning among the slopes of that river gorge in east central Peru, I could see (1) a main building that had been built previously and (2) a set of cinderblock showers and toilets and outdoor sinks for washing; yet the shovels, pick-axes and wheelbarrows indicated clearly that there was more work to do. It's easy to show up at First Presbyterian-Bryan or other communities of faith, or at centers of education, technology, agriculture, business, arts, etc., and say to oneself, "Isn't it great that others have made contributions to get this to this point? Wonder what's happenin' today and this week? Probably there's not much I can contribute substantially." That's natural to conclude and say, but without your and my partnerships with sisters and brothers in the present, the contributions and partnerships of others in the past do not evolve with as great a potency as when we contribute (adding to the past) from our own life-journeys.

An old German proverb is translated, "Work makes life sweet." Some add one word to say, "Honest work makes life sweet." Scooping with one of those shovels and pushing rock and dirt-laden wheelbarrows four mornings and afternoons this past July, I cannot tell you how many times I muttered to myself that German proverb, and the only thing "sweet" about it I could imagine was relief at the end of the shift. But come to think of it, that's what I've thought when being short of sleep in the middle of the night or in the afternoon of the next day during times when a one of my own family members or someone I've come to know is in crisis, and I otherwise would not be short on sleep; or when a project or exam deadline is looming, and I've lost sleep working on that. "Honest work makes life sweet," we may often tell ourselves, all the while wishing much of life were easier. Yet shared honest work is "sweet" (or we can say, "blessed") because, through shared honest work, we are drawn (1) into God-given relationships, (2) into legacy contributions, and (3) into an evolving love greater than the sum of our parts.

The two Scriptures we read this morning both refer to "a house." Psalm 127 (verse 1) communicates how, "Unless those who build a house build from God's intentions, that house is built in vain." Matthew 13 communicates, from the words of Jesus, how "a house is worthy of blessing when the house honors God's people of every type." In both Scriptures, the "house" referred to is "community." It's the family of God. Like those Biblical references to Egypt, as a nation, being "the House of Pharaoh," or, later, of the small nation of Israel as being "the House of King David." At the most basic and foundational level of understanding, God is the builder of anything that's worthy. Our role is discerning, examining, researching how we might labor and work and contribute according to God's intentions, and then caring and giving of and sharing ourselves. In certain roles and times in life, there are pick-axes, shovels, and wheelbarrows "with our names on them." At other times and in other roles, there are classrooms, offices, assembly lines, playgrounds, health care facilities, legislative assemblies, and computer-linked meetings which include a place for our serving in God's building of "family" in this world / in God's building "household" locally, regionally, globally. There's one thing crucial to remember: We are invited to care, to labor, to reach out and serve due to the same reason we receive God's love and are forgiven and made new in God's love – because God is gracious, and because God is ever at work building "community" and "household" with many, many parts - while "the whole is always greater than the sum of our parts and contributions." Because God is gracious and ever at work, (1) our labor is not in vain when reaching out according to God's guidance and intentions and relationship-growing; AND because God is gracious and ever at work, (2) the household – which God is evolving and revealing – shares blessing upon blessing day by day through the life and spirit of Jesus Christ, no matter how different we prefer the blueprint of God's house to be, or how different we prefer the membership roll or census list of God's family to be.

There may or may not literally be a shovel or pick-ax with your name on it, but there are continually persons with whom community-relationships can be built, and with whom caring-respect and service can be extended, through which God's wide household of faith and grace develops and evolves. Each of us do best to ask all the time: "What holds me back, when I'm invited by the One who is gracious and ever at work, and who – seeking to engage you and me – is the One always laboring and building to promote and grow sacred love? What holds me back?" The whole is always greater than the sum of the parts; and honest work, through God's graciousness and love, makes life and God's household blessed. – All honor and praise be to God.