

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

September 6, 2009

Labor Built the House

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; 1 Kings 5:13-18

Labor Day

In the mid-1950's, my parents moved into a newly-constructed house in a suburb within New Orleans. Though our family ultimately outgrew the home and moved to another a few years after I came along, my parents really loved that house. It was the first one they ever owned together and the first place they really could call 'home' after my father's stint in the Navy.

As a child, however, I had a big misconception about it, because on more than one occasion I heard my parents make the claim that they had built the house. I had these visions of Dad laying the bricks and Mom hammering the shingles on the roof. After all, they said they had built the house, and I believed them.

Our language about building and construction can be misleading. I've heard that Donald Trump recently built a hotel and condominium tower along the Chicago river. Too bad for him, not many people are clamoring to move in. I've also heard that Mayor Daley built Millennium Park, a much more popular destination than Trump Tower. But, I've got to say that it seems unlikely to me that

either Donald Trump or Richard Daley laid the concrete, or set the steel in place, or moved the dirt to make way for these massive projects.

So also, it's quite unlikely that King Solomon ever lifted a stone, or carved cedar wood, or hung the doors of the great temple in Jerusalem. Yet we do say that Solomon built the temple. Did he? No, not a chance.

We are left to wonder who the actual laborers were, but that is often the case with the monumental building programs of the ancient world and the modern world, too. We see the clear evidence of massive and complex labor, but we lose sight of those who worked so hard, struggled, and sometimes died in bringing to life the buildings, the churches, the schools, parks, roads, and bridges we use and enjoy every day.

This summer my family and I went for the first time to Northern Michigan. There we saw the suspension bridge that connects the Lower Peninsula to the Upper Peninsula across the Straits of Mackinac. It is a beautiful structure, reported to be the longest suspension bridge in the Western Hemisphere. In our hotel, there were numerous large, framed black-and-white photographs of the construction of the bridge in the 1950's. Most impressive to me were the ones showing the laborers in action. Strong men in hard hats with sun-scorched faces. In one, a man holds his wrench which is half the size of a person as he tightens a nut as big as a car wheel. Others show the acrobatic prowess of workers perched high above the

surface of the water balancing on wires or walking on narrow girders, seemingly oblivious to the height or the danger of falling. And those dangers were very real. In 1956, two men, on their very first day on the job, died when a catwalk collapsed. A statue and plaque on the southern shore memorialize them along with three other workers who perished during various stages of the construction.

That is a reminder that many things that benefit us in each and every day were purchased at a price, sometimes a very high price, a price not paid by us but by someone else.

The sanctuary of my former congregation in Salem, Virginia was built in 1851. At that point in history and in that place, some of the church members and the pastor himself were owners of slaves. In fact, newspaper accounts and other sources document how, over time, this minister became increasingly involved with the abolitionist cause, ultimately freed his slaves and provided for their transportation to Liberia and a stipend to begin a new life there. Some of them were skilled laborers who helped build the pastor a home a year or two after he left Salem. It seemed a reasonable guess that these slaves, as well as some belonging to other members of the congregation and the wider community, took part in the building of the sanctuary. Unfortunately in researching church records, I could never establish this. One day, I phoned an elderly and long-serving African

American pastor in town and put the question to him. “Do you think that slaves were involved in the construction of my church?”

He gave an emphatic “Yes, I do,” and then continued to tell me, “When I first arrived in town fifty years ago, I remember some of my older members telling me how their parents or their grandparents had helped to build the old churches of Salem. They were quite proud of what they had done. They loved the old buildings, the old churches, because their family members had built them.”

How heartening that generations later, these descendants of African American slaves felt pride in the labors of their ancestors. How disheartening that we in the white church had forgotten their role, failed to record their names, and never bothered to mention them in the official histories of our church.

Fortunately for us Scripture gives some insight into who actually built the temple in Jerusalem. It does not name them individually though it catalogues in some detail the conditions of their work and the fruits of their labor. Slave labor made up a large portion of the work force—Scripture uses the term ‘conscripted forced labor.’ This cheap source of labor was drafted from the inhabitants of lands conquered by Israel and, at least according to chapter 5, from the citizenry of Israel itself. They worked in the forests and stone quarries harvesting the raw materials and in Jerusalem as artisans and laborers.

The narrative specifies the order of work (one month on, two off), the provision of taskmasters to keep the process moving, and the name of the high official in charge of forced labor. He'll be stoned to death by an angry mob a few chapters later. It's a sobering picture that Scripture paints: this opulent, extravagant construction program was "built on the backs of regimented peasants"<sup>1</sup> who had no say in these arrangements and in all likelihood received scant benefit from the so-called economic miracle of Solomon's reign.

Unfortunately, that is often how things work in our world. Many who toil each day never truly enjoy the fruits of what they have made. It's a justice issue that Scripture speaks of in various places. A divine curse upon a corrupt people is proclaimed by the prophet Micah, "You shall sow but not reap, you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine." In other places, sowing and reaping, planting and harvesting, building and inhabiting, are the signs of plenty, enjoying a blessed peace with God and neighbor.

Such a peace so easily eludes us. In a time of economic decline, we've all become aware of how tenuous the connection can be between hard work and a stable financial situation. In the discussions over health reform, many of us have been very confused about what is actually on the table, but the real needs of

families should not escape our notice. In 2007, 62% of bankruptcies in our country were linked to medical bills. 25 years earlier, that figure was only 8%.

Of those bankruptcies linked to medical bills, over three-quarters of the families or individuals had health insurance of some kind at the onset of illness. The writers of the study I am citing state, “Most medical debtors were well-educated, owned homes, and had middle-class occupations.”<sup>2</sup> But, their illness, or the illness of a family member stripped them of nearly everything. They sowed but did not reap. They planted but did not harvest. It’s happened, not simply in some faraway place, but right here, in this community. In all likelihood, it will continue to happen, a prospect that haunts us all.

Hopefully, such fears will not stymie our response to what threatens us, but rather will open us in compassion to those who work and sweat and labor hard in ways that benefit us each day. Truly, I want good things for the people who make my shoes, sew my clothing, repair my roof, build the roads I drive on, harvest the food I eat. I want them to have a living wage and good health care and an education for their children. I want them to have what I have, though I may take such gifts for granted.

Part of growing in faith is recognizing our dependence upon God and our interdependence with so many others. It is God who gives us life, but it is the labor of others which sustains us in our life. May we offer thanks for them, and on a day

in which we celebrate our communion with God may we also celebrate our blessed communion with those who harvest for us, and bake, and build, and transport, care for us when we are ill, and clean up after us when we make a mess. May our communion with those who labor for us also be a blessing for them.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament)*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Himmelstein, Thorne, Warren and Woolhandler, "Medical Bankruptcy in the U.S. 2007: Results of a National Study," *American Journal of Medicine*, June 2009, posted June, 2009. Accessed 09/04/09 from <http://atctower.net/atc/tiki-index.php?page=health+care>