

SERMON TITLE: “Unless the Lord Builds the House...”

TEXT: Psalm 127:1-2

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION

Last week James introduced a new sermon series in which we will be looking at our church’s mission statement:

**“To build committed followers of Jesus,
to do His work in our city, country and world.”**

Over the next few months, we’re going to be working through this statement, word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase. This statement gets at the heart of who we understand ourselves to be as Jesus’ followers and the scope of what our mission actually is.

Today, our focus is on the first two words of this statement: “to build.” As I was preparing for this sermon, I spent some time going over some of James’s sermons from the past that dealt with this theme. As a former builder, there were a lot of very obvious and natural connections he was able to make between building physical structures and building a community of Christ-followers.

Those of you who know anything about me will know that there are no such obvious or natural connections with me!

Nonetheless, the question of what we as a church are to build, how we are to build it, and for what purpose we are building is a question that is not only relevant or applicable to those with building backgrounds. The question matters to all of us, whether we swing a hammer, work with little kids, or sit behind a desk, or any of the other tasks that we are engaged in. As a church, we are not just building a physical structure, but a community of people who are supposed to represent Jesus to the watching world. In this sense, we are all builders.

A BUILDING

If you have done any traveling, you have no doubt marveled at some of the things that the human mind can conjure up. From Egyptian pyramids to European Cathedrals to buildings that scrape the sky in Dubai to the Golden Gate Bridge, to... well, the list seems endless. We have an amazing appetite and capacity for building things.

I’m a sports fan. I mainly watch hockey and soccer, but I also watch a bit of football. And as a sports fan, I have always had a fascination with arenas and stadiums. This past Monday night I happened to catch the Dallas Cowboys on Monday Night Football. As a

Canadian I never really understood what a big deal the Dallas Cowboys are south of the border. Well, on Monday night I got a glimpse. Monday night's game was the Cowboys second in a brand new, glittering spectacle of a stadium that cost owner Jerry Jones \$1.5 billion to build!

\$1.5 billion!!

So what does \$1.5 billion get you these days? Well among other things...

- Two 300 ft arches which span the length of the dome
- Over 3000 LCD monitors in luxury suites, concourses, concession areas
- A \$45 million centre-hung video display board that is the largest high definition TV screen in the world
- Glass doors allowing each end zone to be opened
- 300 luxury suites
- A fully retractable roof
- Room for 105 120 people (that's how many attended the first game a few weeks ago—the largest single game attendance in NFL history)! They “only” have around 80 000 seats, but can fit 30 000 people in the party plaza areas on each end of the field.

It was pretty amazing to watch a game in this building, even on TV!

I thought about Cowboys Stadium throughout the week—probably because I had building on the brain for today's sermon.

I thought about what motivated Jerry Jones to build this stadium. The most obvious answer would be: money. Maybe. But, he has a lot of that already and doesn't seem to need much more.

In one interview I read, Jones simply said that he wanted Cowboys Stadium to be *the* standard for a multi-purpose entertainment facility. But he also said that he wanted to build something so spectacular that people would always think of him when they visited it or saw it. He wanted to preserve a name for himself.

As we're going to see, Jerry Jones is not the only one who builds with this goal in mind.

LESSONS FROM THE PSALMS

The text I've chosen for this morning (which we will get to shortly) talks about building and how and why we ought to build. It comes from the Psalms.

There are two reasons why I went to the Psalms as I thought specifically about what it means to be builders and about our mission statement in general this week.

First, the Psalms played a central role in the life of Israel, both in the OT and ever since. The Israelites rehearsed the Psalms in their public worship again, and again, and again.

They recited them as prayers and they sang them as songs. They taught them to their children.

Psalms 127, in particular, is from a group of Psalms called the “Psalms of Ascent (Ps. 120-134) that were recited or sung as Hebrew pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem for the great religious festivals. They are called the Psalms of “Ascent” because pilgrims traveled “up” to Jerusalem, the highest city geographically in Palestine, but also because their journey was metaphorically “up” to God as well—to remembering what he had done for them in the past. Eugene Peterson (translator of *The Message*) has referred to this collection of Psalms as a “Dog-Eared Songbook.”

The Psalms cover a vast range of human thought, emotion and expression—from the heights of joy and praise to the depths of rage and despair. But regardless of what Israel’s external circumstances looked like (whether they were enjoying prosperity and freedom from other nations or they were off in exile in a foreign land), *the Psalms served as a basic reminder to Israel of who they were, who God was, and what they were to do.*

It seems to me that this is what we are trying to do with this sermon series. In many ways, we are beginning a new chapter in the story of this church. We have welcomed Colin and Sarah into our midst; we are nearly finished a major renovation. There is newness in the air and it feels good.

And in the midst of all this newness, like Israel, we too need frequent reminders of who we are, of who God is, and of what we are to do. I think the Psalms can play a similar role for us as they did for ancient Israel.

The **second** reason I chose to go to the Psalms—and Psalm 127 in particular—is because King Solomon, one of the greatest builders of all time, wrote it.

[A brief reminder: Solomon was the son of King David and Bathsheba.]

Solomon was Israel’s master builder. It was under Solomon that Israel really came of age as a nation. He consolidated the Israelite monarchy, he fortified its army and its infrastructure he institutionalized the Temple and its worship. He built—or *supervised* the building of—many of the things that gave Israel legitimacy, influence, and honour as a nation.

[If you want even more details of Solomon’s building exploits, have a look at 1 Kings 7 or 2 Chronicles 8:1-11. We’re not going to read it here, but these passages go through, in precise (sometimes excruciating!) detail, the intricacy and luxury of Solomon’s palace and other buildings he constructed. It is staggering!]

After moving through a laundry list of many of the things that Solomon built as king, 2 Chronicles 8 simply says this about Solomon: *whatever* he desired to build in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and throughout the territory he ruled, he built.

Solomon's reign (at least the first part of it) represents the high point of the Israelite monarchy. Solomon entertained dignitaries from around the known world. He received tribute from all of the nations surrounding him. He was on top of the world. Here is how Solomon is summarized in 1 Kings 10:23-24:

²³ King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. ²⁴ The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart.

As far as builders go, they don't come much more impressive than Solomon. Jerry Jones' football stadium is a pretty impressive structure, but as far as scale, scope, and sheer volume goes, he can't even touch Solomon!

UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE

It is this very same Solomon that wrote Psalm 127, our text this morning:

*¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
its builders labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain.*

*² In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves.*

As many of you know, Solomon's life and reign did not end well. There was a fairly dramatic fall from grace that took place after the events and the declarations that we just read about in 2 Chronicles and 1 Kings. Solomon's obedience to the Lord began to wane. He began to ignore warnings from Israel's prophets in the past and present. The passages from Kings and Chronicles that I referred to earlier describe Solomon's accumulation of massive amounts of horses and chariots and gold. Well, this directly contradicted God's previous command (in Deut 17:16) *not* to do this.

And of course horses and chariots weren't the only things he accumulated. According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (which is a fancy word for sexual playthings), which was also explicitly prohibited (Deut 7:1-6). Aside from the ethical questions we might have about polygamy, these wives (who came from many different nations) had the effect of turning Solomon away from the Lord and toward idols (which was predicted way back in Deuteronomy).

What the king was supposed to do was to live in submission to God and under the authority of Scripture (Deut 17:18-20):

¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. ¹⁹ It is to be with

him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees²⁰ and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left.

Because of Solomon's disobedience, everything he had worked to build was eventually taken away from his people. From this point on, the story of Israel is one of infighting, warfare, divisions, and ultimately exile. The kingdom splits after Solomon, under the rule of his son Rehoboam. Ultimately, in 586 BC, Solomon's temple was destroyed. The Israelites were hauled away by the Babylonians. Everything that Solomon had worked to build was gone. Israel's golden age was over, never to return.

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.

It's not clear at what stage of his career Solomon wrote these words, but I suspect that it *may* have been after he realized that everything he had built would be taken away from him.

I suspect that it was then that he saw clearly that unless what we are building is a part of God's purpose for us, we are labouring in vain; that even our most extravagant building projects will wither and fade unless the God who preserves and sustains our lives, our communities, our cities, our nations, and our planet is with us.

AND US?

So what do we do with Solomon's story? What lessons do we draw as a church? As individuals?

We are not building temples or palaces or nations. We are not amassing weapons and supplies for impending battle. But we *are* still builders who are called to do our part in building Christ's church. Can we learn from Solomon's mistakes?

I think we can. And we must.

Solomon became intoxicated with his wealth, his power, and his fame. He forgot that God had said some very specific things about *how* kings were to rule and *for whom* they were to rule. He forgot that the king's heart was to be turned toward God. He forgot that Israel's kingship was always supposed to look different than the surrounding nations. In the end, Solomon looked tragically similar to the many other power-hungry, greed and lust-driven rulers that our world has seen.

As we know, the temptations faced by Solomon are not unique to the ancient world. I think we can all think of examples of churches and of individuals who over time became more concerned about their own status or, their own fame and influence, than with what God intended for them or for his church to be.

As we will talk about in coming weeks, our task as a church is to build *committed followers of Jesus Christ*.

- Not committed followers of this or that pastor.
- Not committed defenders of this or that denomination.
- Not an impressive set of programs that will attract people to our building.
- Not slick, professional looking weekly services.
- Not an attractive building.
- Not any of the other things that we might like to build if it were up to us.

Don't get me wrong. I think we should do our best in each of the areas mentioned above and others. But we must never substitute the means for ends. If our programs or our building or our services or our pastors or denominations or anything else that people associate with this church become the focal point of our efforts or devotion, we will have made Solomon's error. We will have built in vain.

TOOLS IN THE BOX

So how will we know if we are building in vain or if we are building according to God's purposes?

It seems to me that there are at least four tools in our toolbox that can serve as pretty reliable indicators about whether what we are building here at Neighbourhood Church is on track:

1. PRAYER

When Jesus drove out those using the temple as a place of business (Mat 21), he referred to his Father's house as "a house of prayer." Just a few chapters prior to Solomon's collapse he prays one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Scripture (1 Kings 8:22-53). Prayer has always been one of the central tasks of the church and it is one of our most important building tools. This house we are building is also to be a house of prayer—a place where we live our lives openly and transparently before God, where we bring the needs of our community and our world to God, where we acknowledge our weakness, where we confess our sin (to God and to each other), where we bear witness to the truth that unless God is at work in us and through us, our labours are in vain.

2. WORSHIP

Worship fundamentally is about thanking, adoring, and revering God with all of who we are. Worship happens when we sing songs together, but it also happens when we help our neighbours paint their fence or take them to the hospital; it happens when a group of teenagers devotes an afternoon to cleaning up at the Salvation Army; it happens when we support the work of the church financially—both here at home and around the world; it happens when we gather around the Lord's Table (as we did this morning) to remember what has been done for us and to look forward to what awaits us as Christ's church; it

happens whenever we offer our lives as living sacrifices to God, contributing whatever we can to his kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven

3. LEARNING

In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is. His response:

Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.

God gave us hearts and minds and strength for a reason. He wants us to use them well. I read an article in yesterday's National Post that lamented the religious illiteracy among young people in Canada and the USA. Half of grade twelve students surveyed thought Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple! When a McGill university professor referred to "the patience of Job" in a class, he was met with blank stares!

The church ought to be a place where we study Scripture together, where we make space for tough questions, where we pursue truth, where we never grow complacent thinking that we know "enough" and that there is nothing more for God to show us. All of us, to borrow Paul's words in 1 Cor 13:12, see through a glass darkly. There is always more of God to discover. There is always more growth that can take place. This is why we have Sunday School for our kids, this is why we are currently doing Alpha, why we have care groups. We are to be life-long learners, not just because it's cool to know a whole bunch of stuff, but in order to live more faithfully in God's story.

4. SERVICE

Someone once said that the church is the only organization that exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members! We must never allow ourselves to become too inward-focused. The church is not to be a place where we gather in our holy huddle with little concern for those outside of our four walls. We participate in service projects, we collect funds for various causes, we make pies for the jail... and these are all good and worthy things. They reflect that we are, collectively, looking out.

We must continue to do these things and look for new, creative ways to show our community that we love them and that God loves them. God's love and concern extends to the whole world. So should ours.

These are just four "tools." Perhaps there are others that you can think of as well. But I think they are four important tools that help us as we think about whether the Lord is using us to build his house, or if we are labouring in vain.

If we are building with these tools, to the best of our abilities, a genuine community will continue to be formed—a community that is not based upon similar interests, hobbies, or financial or social status, or any of the other ways we have of labeling and arranging ourselves as human beings.

Rather, the community will be based on the redemptive love of Jesus Christ that brings life where there was death, healing where there was pain, unity where there was once division, wholeness where there was once emptiness, hope where there was once resignation, joy where there was once fear, light where there was once darkness.

SECONDARY BUILDERS

So, can we build a community where these things are a reality for all those who come through our doors?

No. We cannot. In the grand scheme of things, only God can build a community like this. Committed followers of Jesus Christ can only be built by God himself. We are secondary, not primary builders. This is the truth that Solomon lost sight of.

But to say that we are secondary builders is not to say that our task is insignificant. God has granted us a significant role to play in how he will build his church, how he will heal his world, how he will rescue and redeem those who are far from him. Our role is to use the tools we have been given to point others to the hope of the gospel. We are called to embrace this role and devote all of who we are to making it a reality.

May God help us—as a church and as individuals—to build well. May he give us patience and strength and resourcefulness and hope. May he grant us humility and a willingness to repent when we stray from the building plan he has provided.

And may he give us joy as we play our part in the building of a house that will be a light to the nations and a foretaste of God's coming kingdom.

Thanks be to God.