

“Built to Last”

“So we do not lose heart [because] we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

One summer, construction began on two houses in the same neighbourhood in Middletown; but other than the fact that both were single-family dwellings, they could not have been more different. The first house was being built by the owner of a chain of successful car dealerships, and from the day the workers broke ground it was apparent that this was going to be a spectacular mansion. No expense was spared; the finest contractors and craftspeople were employed to build a house with the best materials available. Interior decorators from across the country began working on the design of the rooms, and the outside included a large swimming pool and tennis court. As the house rose, it began to attract crowds who were awed by the building’s grandeur, wondering what kind of events would be hosted in this dwelling that was obviously being built as a showplace for this successful business executive to entertain friends and clients. The construction of this mansion was even being featured in national magazines and television programs, since it would soon be one of the largest and most expensive homes ever built.

The other house was a short walk from this mansion, but it attracted no crowds and was ignored by the media. It was a simple one-story house on a small lot, like many other homes in the community. Instead of hiring contractors and building professionals, it was being built by the owner who worked on it evenings and weekends while also working a full-time shift at the local auto assembly plant. The few people who did notice it were those who were returning from marveling at the nearby mansion; if they said anything, it was a word of derision such as “Well, I guess no one is going to notice *that* house!”

In time, both homes were completed. The mansion became the site of many spectacular galas that attracted the rich and famous from far and wide; the small house became the home of the builder and his family, and other than the occasional family dinner or summer picnic it was fairly quiet. People continued to stop to take photos of the mansion and marvel at its grandeur; no one stopped by the family home other than family and friends. But soon the mansion began to experience structural problems; the roof began to leak, and some of the stones on the exterior began to

crack. There were issues inside with both the plumbing and electricity, and the sophisticated sound system rarely worked. In time, the mansion became known as a “white elephant,” and news articles began to focus on the shoddy work that was done by contractors who were exposed as unreliable and unscrupulous. The condition of the house became so bad that the family had to relocate, and it sat unoccupied for months.

The house built by its owner experienced no such problems. It may have been simple and unnoticed by others, but it was built with solid materials by a person who built it to be not only a house but a home for the people he loved. While the mansion became a symbol of all that could go wrong with a poorly built dwelling, the humble house endured, because it was a house that was built to last.

It is easy to be drawn to things that are large and spectacular; but it is often the humble, unnoticed things that are of more lasting value. This is true not only of buildings but of people; we are drawn to the charismatic, larger-than-life personalities who both entertain and enthrall us with their wisdom, talent and stage presence. But it is often the more humble people, those who rarely attract a crowd or seek our attention, that are the persons who can be the greater blessing to us, persons who can become mentors and role models on how we might live authentic lives of caring and service to others, examples of how we might live as followers of Jesus Christ and children of the light of our Saviour.

By all accounts, the people of Corinth were not impressed by the person of St. Paul. While his letters contained some of the most important teachings on the Christian faith in the New Testament, his physical appearance and the way he spoke left many in the church of Corinth unimpressed. Paul recounts what he has heard in a section of his second letter to the Corinthians that is known as the “Painful Letter”:

- “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’ Let such people understand that what they say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.” – 10:10-11.

While Paul has no doubts about the authenticity of his call as an apostle of Jesus Christ (he begins 2 Corinthians by identifying himself as “*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*” – 1:1), the criticisms of the Corinthians, people he has known and loved for some time, have been painful for him (“*For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.*” – 2:4). Rather than walk away from the Corinthians or to spend his time chastising them for their harshness

in judging him based on his outward characteristics, Paul chooses to use what they might see as signs of weakness as a defense of the authenticity of his apostolic call and the truth of the gospel message that he proclaims. He begins today's Second Lesson with a quote from Psalm 116, which expresses trust in the Lord amid times of trial and tribulation:

- “For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted’; I said in my consternation, ‘Everyone is a liar.’” – Psalm 116: 8-11.

Paul uses the teaching of his Psalm as the basis for his opening statement that “*just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ – we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence*” (4:13-14). Paul’s confidence in all circumstances – including the pain he has endured because of the hurtful words of the Corinthians – is grounded in his faith, which contains at its heart the conviction of how the rest of the salvation story is to be fulfilled for those who are in Christ Jesus. For Paul, the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ is encapsulated in the statement that “*the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence.*” (4:14); this is the basis for Paul’s persistence in his ministry even as he experiences so much affliction and distress. This hope is based on the character of God, and Paul includes the Corinthians as being among those who will be “presented” before God. Because Christ was raised from the dead, believers who are one with Christ and shared his suffering already have newness of life and are assured that, at the end of time, they will have a resurrection like his:

- “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:4-5.
- “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” – Philippians 3:10-11.

Christ has died and has been raised; believers currently share his death and confidently expect to share his resurrection at the last time, at the *Parousia*. At the center of this gospel is Paul’s affirmation of God’s grace, by which he means God’s freely given, unmerited gift of new life in Christ.

- “Paul is again arguing his right as an apostle and defending the authenticity of his call. The fact that he suffers, the reality and despair, his weakness … this affliction does not negate or invalidate his proclamation but in fact points to the very gospel he preached.” – Dirk G. Lange.

Another sign of the authenticity of Paul’s apostolic ministry is his declaration that “*everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*” (4:15). As Christ came “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45), so does an apostle of Christ serve for the sake of others, proclaiming the grace of God that is ours in the death and resurrection of Christ. Grace, when it transforms a life, generates glorification of God. The goal of human life that has been transformed by God’s grace is to glorify God, to give thanks to God, and to bless God:

- “Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others” – 2 Corinthians 9:13
- “… give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:18.
- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.” – 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

Because of God’s grace and the hope founded upon it, Paul reaffirms that “*we do not lose heart*” (4:16). The reason Paul has the assurance that those who are in Christ do not “lose heart” (*enkakeo*, “despair, become weary”) is in understanding the distinction between the “inner” and “outer” nature. Anyone who goes by appearances, by what can be seen on the outside, would surely err because what they would see is that the “outer nature” is “wasting away,” being destroyed. By repeated referring to his afflictions, persecutions, and hardships, Paul openly embraces the external picture of himself as one who is “wasting away” (“*For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.*” – 4:11-12). But the “outer nature” is not a reliable indicator of the full picture, for it is the “internal portrait” that is the one to be taken seriously, as “*our inner nature is being renewed day by day*” (4:16b). Paul characterizes the afflictions he and other Christians suffer for the sake of the gospel as being “slight” and “momentary”; seen from this perspective, their purpose is to prepare us “*for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure*” (4:17). Paul looks upon his afflictions as a part of the life of

faith; they are signposts that one is proceeding as should be expected for one who in following Jesus has made the decision to “*deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24). Paul’s cataloguing of his hardships also serves to document that he is on the right track and is therefore a proper leader who is due the full respect and adherence as an apostle to the people to whom he is sent to proclaim the gospel.

- “The faith that we know through Jesus Christ and in which we participate through the Holy Spirit is a faith not found in ourselves, or through our own effort. It is a faith outside of us, a faith that the Holy Spirit awakens, nourishes and strengthens within us. It is the faith of Christ, who himself was afflicted unto death, broken, despised and, in the eyes of the world, singularly unsuccessful.” – Lange.
- Not only are appearances misleading, but they are also temporary; “*for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal*” (4:18). Paul confidently asserts that “*we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*” (5:1). Paul’s use of the phrase “we know” draws on material that Paul assumes his readers know and embrace (“*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ were baptized into his death?*” – Romans 6:3). Paul contrasts an earthly, temporal tent that is meant to be a temporary dwelling with an eternal, heavenly edifice that is built to last. This latter building is eternal because it is from God and not made with human hands; it is the place of which Jesus speaks when he assures his disciples that “*in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places ... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also*” (John 14:2-3). It is the eternal dwelling which gives us the confidence to believe and trust in our God who is “*our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*” (ELW Hymn 632).
- “As he who is called *Resurrexit* (‘he is risen’) is risen from death and grave, so he who says, ‘I believe’ (*credo*) and clings to him must also follow. For he has gone before us that we should follow, and he has begun the work in us, that through his Word and baptism we may be daily raised in him.” – Martin Luther, 1533.

As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this morning, we are reminded of the fundamental transformation that happens when we are born anew to a living hope through water and the Word. It is through God’s gift of baptism that we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Baptism). Our identification as children of God is the means through which we have

strength and hope each day of our lives even as we look to that day when God will gather all God's children together into God's eternal home. As children of God, we are heirs of the great promises that God bestows on all who God loves and cherishes, our heavenly Father from whom "*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever*" (ELW Hymn 781). As we are heirs of the legacies bestowed on us by our earthly parents, as children of God we are the recipients of an inheritance that nothing and no one can take away from us:

- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." – 1 Peter 1:3-5.

As Martin Luther teaches us in the *Small Catechism*, the gifts and benefits of Baptism for God's beloved children are that they "*bring about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, and the words and promises of God declare.*" Even when our "outer nature" inevitably wastes away as our earthly life draws to a close, through baptism we have the assurance that because "*our inner nature is being renewed day by day*" we live in the comfort of a holy and certain hope that we have "*an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*" (4:16-18).

- "When we are baptized in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are brought into God's household. It is the mark of our adoption. Because God is our Father, we are under his divine protection and governed by his Holy Spirit ... As the body is not separate from the head, so Jesus Christ shows us that his life is common with ours, and that we are partakers of all his benefits." – John Calvin.

The mansion that had been built to be a showplace that would fill all who looked upon it soon became better known as a symbol of what can go wrong when you focus solely on outward appearances and neglect the necessary details of building a house that will last. While the humble home down the street never gained fame in the community, it became a solid dwelling for a family who valued love for one another and for their neighbours over outward appearances. As God's beloved children who have been built into a house of living stones with Christ as our cornerstone, our hope is built on the blessed assurance that because of our baptism into Christ Jesus our identity is rooted in what God has made us through water and

the Word: “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may declare the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). We dwell in the house God has made for us in Christ – a house that is built to last.

Amen.