

You Didn't Build That
Ezra 6:14-22

"If you've got a business, you didn't build that." That's what Barack Obama said while he was campaigning in 2012, and given his general interest in an increased role for the government in all areas of life, he was probably trying to say that, because business owners benefit from things the government pays for, such as roads and public schools and police departments, they should recognize the important role the government played in their success, and thus be happy to pay more taxes.

"You didn't build that." Even to the most devoted worshippers of the state don't really want to hear that. For don't we all enjoy the feeling we get from a job well done? Don't we enjoy the satisfaction and even the pride we get from looking on the fruits of our labor and realizing that it was our skill and determination that helped us accomplish a goal we had set for ourselves? Whether we've helped to rebuild an organ console damaged by vandalism or just because we've cut the grass after a much-needed rain, we all like to receive credit, especially when credit is due.

"You didn't build that." Well, regardless of our politics, and even though we may not want to hear it, there is, in fact, a theological truth behind those words, a truth that today's passage underlines. For the people of God had just completed the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the most important project anyone in those days could possibly undertake. For back then, the only way anyone could get a glimpse of God's saving work in Jesus Christ was to witness and participate in the great liturgical drama that could only take place in the Temple, the place that would eventually witness how that drama would play itself out hundreds of years later.

Yes, it was only in the lampstands of the Temple that God's Old Testament people could see that Christ is the true light of the world. It was only on the table of showbread that people could see that Christ is the Bread of Heaven, nourishing us with His life-giving Spirit. And it was only through the sacrifices offered on the altar that people could see and touch and taste and smell the fact that only Christ's blood can satisfy the death penalty that all our sins deserve. Oh yes, in building the Temple, the people of Ezra's time were doing all they could to come closer to Christ, and to make it possible for others to be connected to the True Vine as well.

And we modern-day Christians have the same sort of work to do, don't we? Since Jesus has already completed the great work of salvation, we know that the way we build the Kingdom of God is not by constructing buildings, but by engaging in the great work of evangelism and missions, showing and sharing the truth and love of Christ with people both far and near. But last week, we were also reminded of our equally important need to purify the Temple by participating in God's great work of sanctification, ridding our hearts of any hypocrisy, so that we might remove any barrier that might hinder others from joining us in the great journey of discipleship. Yes, just like God's Old Testament people, we have a Temple to build.

And it's only natural for us to rejoice whenever our efforts bear fruit. We rejoice when a church plant like the Church of the Resurrection gets started in New Orleans, and when new members join existing congregations. We rejoice whenever any of us Christians more clearly display the character of Christ, loving Him and other people more completely and more consistently.

But while the people of Ezra's time were absolutely right to celebrate what they had built, at the same time, they knew they didn't really deserve to get the credit for it. In short, they knew they hadn't really built the Temple, at least not by themselves.

Look for example at the end of verse 17: the people offered a sin offering of 12 goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. What was that about? Why would confession of sin be part of rejoicing at a job well-done? Why would God's people feel it necessary to express their need for God's forgiveness at such an otherwise triumphant moment?

Well, after studying the book of Ezra up to this point, we should know, shouldn't we? After all, since the offering was made on behalf of all 12 tribes, it was also for all those people who stayed behind in Babylon instead of making the trip back to Jerusalem to help with the reconstruction efforts – and they certainly needed some forgiveness, didn't they? And what about those who had returned, but who had started building fancy houses for themselves instead of building God's house first? Might they feel a little bit guilty about the 16-year delay in the project's completion, the time between when they laid the foundation of the Temple and when they finally managed to finish the rest of it? Might those who had become distracted by the things of this world have something they needed to confess?

So, sure, when God's people remembered how they had to have not one but two prophets of God to accuse them and prompt them to get back on track, they knew that even on the day when the Temple was finished, they had no room for pride. Instead confession of sin was the order of the day.

And so was a humble attitude about their achievements. Yes, the first part of verse 17 lists all the animals they offered as part of the dedication service: 100 bulls and 200 rams and 400 lambs. Now, at first glance that might sound impressive – until you compare it with what King Solomon had offered when the First Temple had been dedicated so many years before: 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. Yes, the people of God had managed to complete the Second Temple, but compared to the golden magnificence of the First Temple, it was no great shakes.

Indeed, they themselves weren't very much to look at either. After all, they were only a tiny remnant of the mighty nation that the Assyrians and Babylonians had defeated and carried off into exile. And when compared to their ancestors, they were as poor as they were powerless. Their ancestors had King Solomon to lead the dedicatory celebrations surrounding the First Temple, a king who reigned over everything between Egypt and Mesopotamia. But the people of Ezra's time were no more than subjects of the pagan Persian empire. Yes, the people who dedicated the Second Temple had much more reason for humility than for pride.

And that kind of confession and humility is good for all of us, even when we celebrate our achievements, whatever they may be. Now, sometimes we rejoice as a group, as many of you did after finishing the renovation of this building in the early 1990's. On another occasion, I remember when we celebrated our bicentennial in 2007 with the unveiling of a magnolia marker out at Point Lookout and hosting a Presbytery meeting and throwing a birthday party for Mr. Daniels. It's encouraging to mark important milestones, to look back on a job well done.

Of course, there are individual achievements as well – degrees finished, businesses built, children who have gone on to have successful families and careers of their own. And it's a good thing to celebrate such accomplishments. But while we do that, it's also a good thing to remember that the best

of our efforts have been tarnished by sinful motives or insufficient efforts. For let's face it: for every one of our accomplishments, there are so many words we wish we could take back, so many deeds we wish we could undo, so many regrets about things left undone. So if we would be completely honest with ourselves, and if we would avoid the sins of pride and arrogance, we need to be careful to give God the glory for anything we may have achieved. We need to thank God for His grace whenever we remember what He has allowed sinners like us to accomplish.

And isn't that what the people in this passage did? After all, they knew good and well that Obama's infamous quote really was true in their case: God really was the One Who was responsible for the Temple being rebuilt. For what do we read in the very last verse of today's passage? It says that God was the One Who had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them. That means it was God Who had allowed Cyrus to conquer both Assyria and Babylon, and thus to reverse the brutal resettlement programs of those earlier empires. And it was God Who had moved Cyrus to permit the people not just to return to their homeland, but to rebuild the Temple. Moreover, God even prompted Cyrus to provide the funding for them to finish the job.

Oh, yes, God's people knew they didn't have the power or influence or wealth necessary to have accomplished any of those things. But they knew God did. And so their celebration was rooted not just in confession and humility, but in acknowledgment of their weakness and their total dependence on the Lord.

And Jesus made the same point to His disciples in our responsive reading, didn't He? For what did He say? "I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing." And that's the truth. None of us are anything more than branches, completely helpless unless we are connected to the One True Vine. The fact is that unless the Spirit of Christ flows through us, we can't bear any fruit, we can't build anything for Him.

And what kind of fruit did Jesus tell His disciples to bear? The fruit of obedience to His commandment of love. In the same way, the people in today's passage were careful in all their celebrations to make sure that they obeyed God in everything they did. That's why they offered whatever sacrifices they could afford: they wanted to give God the very best that they could. That's why they set the priests and the Levites to do the work that the Law of Moses had appointed for them to do, the work that King David and King Solomon had organized their ancestors to perform in the First Temple. And that's why they began to observe all the festivals prescribed in the Scriptures, beginning with the Passover that is described in verses 19-20.

And come to think of it, didn't that Passover celebration reinforce the importance of confession and humility? After all, the Passover was a remembrance that God was the One Who had brought their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt, in spite of their sinful reluctance to leave. The Passover was a remembrance that God by His grace had spared their firstborn children even while all the firstborn of the Egyptians and their animals had died in a terrible plague. And how had the people of God managed to escape? By killing a lamb and putting its blood on the outside of their houses, thus posting a very public sign of their helplessness, of their faith in God in the midst of a completely overwhelming, impossible situation.

And of course we know the ultimate reality to which the Passover Lamb pointed, don't we? We know that on the cross of Calvary, God would slay His own firstborn, His only Son, the Lamb of God so

that unworthy sinners who trust in Him might be brought out of bondage to sin and death. We know that it is only by God's gracious provision of such a perfect sacrifice for us that we are saved from the punishment that all our sins deserve.

And yet we also know that it is possible to combine a recognition of our own sin and our own weakness with rejoicing in the providence and grace of God. And that's because Jesus didn't just die on the cross. No, He walked out of His tomb on the third day, and that's why we can be sure that His sacrifice was accepted, and thus that all who trust in Him are forgiven and free. We know that in the resurrection of Christ, God has given us every reason for rejoicing, both in the new life He has already given us today, and in the resurrection life He has promised to all His people forever.

And we see that same truth in the last verse of today's passage, for it says that in Ezra's time the Lord had made the people joyful. Weak and sinful though they were, halting and humble though their efforts had been, God in His grace and mercy had given them a reason to rejoice, a reason to sing His praise, a reason to celebrate.

And the same thing is true for us. No matter what we have done, no matter what we have left undone, Jesus laid down His life for us because He loves us. And He continues to build His Temple, His very body of living stones, made up of all those throughout space and time who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. So let us rejoice in the work He has done. Let us rejoice in the fruit He has allowed us to bear. Let us rejoice in what He has equipped us to accomplish with the lives He has given us, with the lives He has redeemed. But let us rejoice most of all that He has drawn us to Himself and made us His own.