

**Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27) – Year B – November 11, 2009 - Homily**  
**Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44**  
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We have a very important reminder of humanity's place in God's creation this evening. It comes in the form of three short verses, of proverb-like pointedness, from Psalm 127. "Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it. Unless the Lord watches over the city, in vain the watchman keeps his vigil. It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; vain, too, to eat the bread of toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep." In short, whether we are aware of God's presence or not, God not only desires to be involved, but also is caught up in the most commonplace activities of our everyday lives. As pastor and author Frederick Buechner tells us in his book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*, there is the reality of the quotidian mystery, and the reality of being present to God, the sacred mystery.

Psalm 127 is a song of ascent, sung by pilgrims on their way up to Mount Zion. The Psalm's intent is to prepare pilgrims to worship God. In making God the focus of the psalm, we gain a greater clarity and perspective on God's role in our lives. The first verse speaks of God's involvement in family and community. The word "house" is a metaphor for these intimate and broader relationships. After Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the early Christians' understanding of God evolved into the doctrine of the Trinity, which in its simplicity and its unfathomable depths is about relationship. In the Psalm, we see a theocentric locus expressed as God's attention to relationship with His children, and with God working through our own relationships with one another. There are enough examples in history to demonstrate admirably the problems that arise when people shun God, and draw from our own very limited resources. When even one individual believes that they are the center of the universe and act as though the world revolves around them, the repercussions are unpleasant at best, and disastrous at worst. Think about it, why else would God make two and three year-olds much smaller than adults, if not so that the potential damage of our little egomaniacs can be mostly contained! The real threat comes when adults have never grown out of that pure and perfect self-centeredness, and distinct lack of humility. Vanity indeed! You and I are God's creatures, but more than that, we are blessed with a special relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Such that, in obedience to God's will, all that we create in the world is part of God's creative work.

In the second verse, God's providential care is extended to the whole city. God is the true and steadfast watchman who never falls asleep on the job, and against whom no enemy can stand. The city is the modern-day equivalent of culture at large. Who can deny that the North American and other first world cultures are largely built on individualism, where the predominant value system is one of achievement, success and winning at all costs? Unfortunately, those values are measured by society's standards, which are not necessarily Godly measures. And worse, our worth as human beings, and our value to society is so often judged by these criteria. Even though our real worth and value is intrinsic as a child of God, made in God's image, and our real work is as God's instruments in the world, pursuing the work that God has given us to do, through our God-given gifts. It is truly good news that the work we are called to does not depend solely on us. It was begun by God before we were born. It continues by God's grace through us, and will be completed long after we are with the Lord.

There are constant warnings throughout Scripture to all of us who believe that what we might build is under our control. The only sure foundation on which to build our house, and our community is the rock of faith in Christ.

Do we have any workaholics here tonight? Well verse 3 of our psalm is an elegant commendation of what we now call a balanced lifestyle. One of the biggest pitfalls of lay and ordained ministry is the idea that we are called to work ourselves to death in the name of God. Here's some more good news! In the name of God, working ourselves to burnout is most definitely not in God's plan for our lives. The motivation behind that kind of extreme behavior is probably a lot more to do with our own issues around power, control or even fear, than it is to do with surrendering to God's will. There is also a severe cost to family and relationships when our personal obsessions get such a stranglehold on us. Our true welfare depends on God's creative action in our family and community. What is sometimes hard for us to grasp is that God is always working in all aspects of our lives, even when things do not seem to be going well. God is love and life, and God's redemptive activity always brings about new life.

In the Gospel of John (12:24), Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Therein lies the rub at the heart of our psalmist's message. We frequently have a hard time dying to self, in order to experience the joy of new life in Christ. Then there is the difficulty of letting go of some of the things that clutter our lives, or that have reached the end of their usefulness, in order to make room for the new things that God has planned for us. Ironically, our society is often described as a "culture of death", and yet there is a huge gap in the world's understanding of the hope and promise of the resurrection. This is what gives our lives in Christ meaning, and it is the good news in Christ that is so vital to our continuing mission as the Body of Christ, for the life of the world. Ultimately, human labor is ennobled through participation in God's providential care and love for the whole of creation. A love so great that God sent His only Son, our Lord, so that all who believe in Him might be saved, and know the power of God's redeeming love and grace.

Just like our Psalmist, Buechner shares that when we are truly paying attention to living our lives, every meeting, each conversation, art, literature, and all other events in our lives are imbued with God's presence. Again, just like our Psalmist, Buechner also notes that in order to draw meaning from these relational and community encounters, we must also be silent before the Word, and allow ourselves to be open to the mystery that is God. Perhaps no less so than for those in the ancient world, but in different ways, we face the reality of everyday situations, which overwhelm and imprison twenty-first century humanity. The temptations and distractions of modern living are a serious hazard to be negotiated, but also to be brought back into perspective against our dependence on God for all things. We live as created beings in a world created by God. All that lives and breathes, all that has meaning in us and around us flows from the life-giving Spirit of God. God is greater than anything that can, does or ever will threaten us. Our trust is rightly placed in God. Our hope is in Christ Jesus our Lord, and our faith is the courage to endure without losing heart.

Amen.