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Unless the Lord Builds the Harley

a sermon on Psalm 127

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Unless the Lord builds the Harley, they labor in vain who seek to ride it. ... I apologize to anyone here who does not recognize my reference to a Harley Davidson motorcycle. I was recently on sabbatical, and during my absence Jerry Headrick did a wonderful job serving Westminster and preaching the Word. The motorcycle idea is his. He said a church can be like a guy who goes out in his yard and rides a lawnmower around in little circles: putt-putt-putt-putt. Or the church can be like the gal who hops on her boyfriend's Harley: vrrrrroom.

I would have said a church can be all about maintenance, or it can be all about mission. His way is more vivid. My way is more straightforward. But we are both saying the same thing. The maintenance church is obsessed with survival. It just cares about the status quo, keeping things going the way they always have. Just like a guy on a lawnmower, the maintenance church is not going far and not going fast. The mission church is going somewhere fast, and if the guy up front is Jesus Christ, the ride will be wild and the destination good.

Jerry's main point in that sermon, if I understand it right, is that we as a church — Westminster — we are not living up to our potential. We are wasting some of our spiritual gifts. We are missing some opportunities. We are not passionate enough about Christ and his work in our community. Of course, Jerry could say that because he was only here for a limited time. I'd be going out on a limb if I said that. But then again, what's the good of a pastor who won't go out on a limb? I think he is right.

I have long felt I am not living up to my potential as a pastor. That's one reason I've gone back to school. It's not for lack of effort. I try very hard. But I worry it's the things I don't know or don't see that hold me back. I want to be the pastor God wants me to be, just as I am sure we all want to be the church God wants us to be.

I tend to be hard on myself but easy on the church. I think, "Well, one can only expect so much." But what does God think? What does he expect? He expects every one of us to be fully surrendered disciples who use the gifts he has given. I know we have some wonderful people, loving people, doing wonderful things. In any church you always have about 20% of the people doing 80% of the work. I am a pessimist, so I rejoice that we have 20% using their gifts. Twenty is a lot better than zero! God is an optimist. He

wants to see 100% using their gifts – and that does not necessarily have to be inside the church. He wants you to be a missionary at your job and in your community. That’s worse in a way. Most Christians would rather serve on a church committee than explain to a neighbor why they believe in Jesus.

Bottom line, I guess: Jerry was right, and it was a *loving* thing to say. God wants us to all live up to our potential. He wants us as a church to live up to our potential. He wants us to use the gifts and opportunities he has given us. I love this church. I want us – all of us – to more and more live up to our potential.

Hopefully Jerry got you pumped up and ready to ride that Harley. Now it’s up to me to tell you what that means and how to do it. On the plus side, this isn’t something new or odd. I’ve preached before about moving from maintenance to mission. I’ve already told you that your baptism was your ordination to ministry and that you are a missionary. We’ve already been talking about how we can bless our community and get the exciting Good News of Jesus Christ out there.

So what does that Harley look like? And how do we climb on and ride? The answer to these questions begins with a song. No, it’s not “Born to Be Wild.” It’s Psalm 127 – a different kind of song, but a much more realistic one.

If you have your pew Bibles open, look at the superscription right above Psalm 127. The superscription, which is a part of the original Hebrew text, not something a modern editor added in, says, “A song of ascents. Of Solomon.” This tells us when and how the song was used, and when you know when and how a song is used, you understand it better. For example, if I say, “Silent Night,” you think Christmas, maybe of the Christmas Eve candlelight service. If I say, “Rocky Top,” ... well, we all know what that’s used for. If you hear the first few notes of the wedding march, instantly you know what it’s for. Some songs have a special function, and that function is part of the meaning.

Songs of ascent were sung when pilgrims in ancient Israel went up to the Temple for festivals. Our psalm is the eighth in a collection of songs that runs from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. If you had lived in ancient Israel, you would know these psalms by heart. You would have learned them when you were young, going up to the temple with your family. Every year at Passover and Pentecost, your extended family would have traveled from whatever town or village you lived in up to Jerusalem. You always go *up* to Jerusalem, because it sits on a hill. That’s why they are called songs of *ascent*. You sang them as you *ascended* into the city. Thousands of travelers going up to the festival would have met on the roads. By the time you got near the city, you would be part of a great throng of people. And then it would happen, someone would start singing, and the whole crowd would join in, praising God. It would be the highlight of the year.

So that's what the song was for. Now what does it say? Look at the things it talks about: building a house, guarding a city, getting up for work in the morning, going to bed, raising children. This is the stuff of everyday life – things you do day in and day out. People in ancient Israel didn't have the lifestyle advantages we do: sports, entertainment, books, travel, and such. For them, these things were not just essential to life. These things were life. Building a house, taking care of it. Guarding the city. Work and toil. Raising children. Besides worship, that's what they did. So the psalm is about life, ordinary everyday life and the things we do day in, day out.

And what does the psalm say about all this? *The effort is ours, but success comes from God.* There is a lesson here for all of us about life: You can work hard to build the life you want, but if God isn't in it, you're wasting your time. The psalm says that in all these things that really matter, our effort is necessary, but what ultimately makes the difference is God.

What's true of houses and cities is also true of churches. This psalm had two layers of meaning. The first layer was about the average Israelite and his house and his security and his children. The second layer was about the city of Jerusalem, and the Lord's house – the Temple – Solomon had built there, and the sons of David, whom God promised would rule upon his throne. The well-being of every man, woman, and child was ultimately in God's hands. The well-being of God's people, and the city, the Temple, and the monarchy that together constituted their national life – these too were in God's hands. That's the second layer.

For us the two layers are a bit different, but not so different we can't see the meaning. Our lives, our efforts are ultimately in God's hands. That's layer one. Layer two is the church: Unless the Lord builds this house, we labor in vain who try to build it. Unless the Lord builds and drives the Harley, we labor in vain who seek to ride it.

This is the beginning of our answer. We must acknowledge our absolute dependence upon God. We must humbly seek his blessing. Our church ought to look like his blueprint, not ours. Our success or failure is measured by his standards, not ours.

There is a great freedom in this, but maybe not the one you were hoping for. To say that the success of our church is in God's hands does not absolve us of the need to work. The psalm does not say, "You don't have to build your house. God will build one for you. Never mind guarding the city, God will see to that." How crazy would that be? The effort is ours. God works through us. That's how he likes to do things. Only he really knows why. Take the Temple in Jerusalem as an example. God didn't build it. He had Solomon do it. And yet God honored his work and blessed the Temple with his presence. When God wanted to chastise his people, he let the Babylonians tear the Temple down. When he wanted it rebuilt, he sent Zerubbabel to do it. And when Jesus came, and the Temple had fulfilled its function and it wasn't needed anymore, he

let the Romans tear it down again. Human action, God's purposes. Humans built and humans tore down; in all of it God worked out his purposes. So no, God does not excuse us from the labor. He tells us to get busy.

Where we find freedom is: we are not slaves to success as the world defines it. Our job is to be faithful. Our job is to plant seeds. God gives the increase, and God judges us based on whether our hearts were in our work. We are not responsible for the outcome. We can leave that to God. One of my professors, Dr. Doug Webster is writing a book about ministry, and he gave me the idea to start with Psalm 127. He wrote:

In Psalm 127, the psalmist proposes a new scale for measuring meaning in ministry. His prayer helps us to picture the spiritual health, physical well-being and relational strength that comes from God-centered communion. *This is the divine defense against the vanity of soul-draining effort, competitive insecurity, and restless hyperactivity.* [*Living in Tension: A Theology of Ministry*, p. 232]

We are free from working ourselves to death. Verse two is beautiful, isn't it? "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved." God does not want to work you to death. It is not his desire to overwhelm you with busyness. This is one reason why we structure our meeting times the way we do. We have to meet to get things done, but we don't want to waste time in long, unnecessary meetings. It is also a reason why we need 100% of the people doing 100% of the work. Twenty percent cannot carry the load without breaking their backs.

Doing God's work is not about being constantly busy. If it were, Jesus did a poor job of it. He always took time for prayer and meals. He never seemed in a hurry. It is about a grace-filled life ... and the quality of our relationships ... and sharing the good news. Being a missionary right where you are.

OK, that's a little about how you ride. What does the Harley look like? Dr. Webster is going to help us again. He wrote:

There is considerable concern today to re-invent the church, but I am convinced that there is no better pattern for building the household of faith than the blueprint followed by the New Testament Church. We don't have to design new structures to meet ever-changing demands. We need to build the household of faith from the Lord's blueprint. [p. 233]

What is the Lord's blueprint? Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This is God's plan for turning religious consumers into disciples, for turning frightened believers into missionaries, and for turning strangers into the family of God. Look at the New

Testament church: the way they gave generously, the ways they loved one another, the way they shared their faith.

Christian truth and scripture, fellowship, worship, especially the sacraments. Every church does these. What makes the difference between a lawnmower and a Harley is devotion, the passion with which we do them. Take the apostle's teaching, for example. We are devoted to that when we love the scriptures and hunger to learn more truth. Do you have that love and hunger? Are you willing to submit to the Word of God? To be not just a hearer but a doer? That's the rub, you see. Every church worthy of the name teaches the Bible. Is there a hunger, though? A passion?

The Lord's Supper was huge in the early church. We do it, but I wonder if it means as much to us as it should. I could go on. In some ways, we are doing the right things, we just need more heart and soul—more passion.

Where does this passion come from? Not from fear and not from guilt. Please do not think I am trying to scare or guilt you into doing more. Fear and guilt can show your need to change, but they do not sustain holy living or joyful ministry. Instead, passion comes from love—love for God, love for your community, love for this church. When God's grace grabs you, and you know God has made you his own, that certainty sustains ministry. So forget fear and guilt. Don't try to get more passion for our mission by whipping up your emotions. Instead, focus on the truth that God has loved you and made you his own, and now he sends you out to do his work.

Let's face it, we live in a hard time for churches. People don't believe. They don't care. And they stay away in droves. Once upon a time, if you did church things well: a good service with good music and preaching, fun activities that brought people together, you couldn't fail. People went looking for churches. Not so today. Churches that grow will be those who (a) experience God's grace and (b) find ways to reach their community with the good news.

I honestly believe God is pruning his church in the Western world. We sold out too much to the world. We got a little too fat and lazy. We settled for too little of his transforming power. So now he is pruning. It isn't the first time. It happened all through scripture. God's people forgot how much they depend on him. They started living in their own power. Then they wandered after other gods. But God always preserves a faithful remnant, and he prunes. I think the church in America in 50 years will look very different from how it looks today. It will be leaner. It won't have many of the luxuries we have always taken for granted. Decent salaries for ministers may be one of those luxuries. Nevertheless, the church that survives the pruning will be faithful. And it will bear fruit. And that's what it's all about, bearing fruit.

What might happen to you and me, to this congregation? That is ultimately up to God. Our part is to be faithful and to trust him. I am certain God is not finished with us yet. He has much more exciting ministry for us to do. We will experience his awesome power among us again and again. I am not even sure our best days are behind us. Many of you remember when this church had more people, more money, more staff, more youth and vitality and strength. Maybe our best days were 30 years ago. But we don't know that. With God all things are possible. And maybe God doesn't look at churches the way we do. Maybe buildings and numbers are not what he's most interested in. Maybe he has great things in store for us. There's one way to find out.

One final practical matter, and I'll conclude. Very soon some of you will receive a call from a member of our nominating committee, asking you to serve as a deacon or elder or on next year's nominating committee. If that happens to you, do not ask, "Do I want to do this?" Ask, "Does God want me to do this?" It's a very different question.

In conclusion, this sermon not a complaint, especially against those who work so hard. Your ministry is appreciated: those who work with our children, those who share musical gifts, those who keep the church running, those who serve our Interfaith Hospitality hosting, those who give, those who love. Caring and compassion are things we do well. This is a great church. We believe the gospel. We try to live it. It's just that our greatness includes a lot of potential, and we aren't yet living up to it.

How will we know when we are? You will know we are on the Harley when we care more about our mission than about ourselves.

Amen.

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