

## “The Lord Works In Material Ways”

1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Psalm 102:11-22

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Okay, I concur. It's true that the Lord works in mysterious ways. I've had too many gracious experiences I cannot simply chalk things up to coincidence or mere happenstance. There have been too many times in my life of feeling like I'm part of a magnificent orchestra pit under the direction of a very skilled, albeit invisible, conductor. As I listen to other people's life stories, I know I'm not alone with my oboe (so to speak). I believe God delights in getting credit in times like these. And it's probably particularly joyful to our heavenly host that we humans are willing to concede that some things just can't be rationally delineated.

All that affirmed, I also need to say though that it is very clear to me, and hopefully to all of you, that our Lord also works in material ways. I believe having faith in the Lord is very much as it is defined in the Book of Hebrews – a matter of having the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1) At the same time I also believe having faith is a matter of discerning “tangible proofs” of our Lord's living presence in our lives. Put another way, I believe faith helps us dust for God's fingerprints. By careful, prayerful examination we are able to detect where God has been working in the world.

There was a time in ancient history when dusting for those prints wasn't necessary. People of that era could just look right at the hands ... the hands of a wood-hewing laborer, of a true teacher and healer, of a servant spiked clear through with hammers of faithless fear and prejudice. Yes, in that time, the world could clearly see the hands of Mary's son, Jesus of Nazareth. Immediately following his cruel crucifixion, he appeared for forty days in resurrected form and the world continued to see those hands in person. If you have any doubts about this, just ask Thomas when he greets you in heaven.

But then, after the forty day resurrection tour, the blessed hands of God ascended out of sight. And from that time on, detecting the handiwork of the Lord physically among us became a matter of believing the Spirit of the Risen Christ is with us. Not only with us, but actively working *within* us to reach out to the world so as to keep building upon His ministry of reconciling all sinful things with the pure wholeness of heavenly

life.

The apostle Paul is one tremendous example of a believer who knew the Spirit of the Lord was working through him. The man who quite literally saw the Light rightly gets credit for spreading and expanding the Gospel wherever he could. He was certainly regarded as the beloved pastor, the authoritative father-figure, of the congregations he started-up. Yet through it all, Paul was persistent in placing his foundational work upon the greater, only truly enduring foundation that is Jesus Christ.

And Paul knew from the Scriptures that this real foundation was laid down long before Jesus' physical birth in cattle shed, wonder-walking on the face of the earth, and resurfacing from a tomb. It was a work in progress from the very beginning, a work in progress that came with reminders such as that found in Psalm 102. In this Psalm, Paul, and we who read it and hear it today, have affirmed for us that humans grow-up and then fade like grass, but the name of the Lord our God, a name synonymous with complete compassion, endures for all generations. Through all generations it is, as verse 16 declares, the Lord who builds up Zion – that is, the people of God.

Paul upheld this very message to the church in Corinth, this message about God's building up from the foundation of saving grace by way of people. He did so making clear, as one Bible scholar rather formerly puts it, that "One's life, what one builds, one's work, must be appropriate to Jesus Christ, the normative foundation." (J. Paul Sampley, NIB).

This means everyone. To build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ is every one of his believers business. We bring to this task what we've got to bring, and it is a building process that does not require only the best materials. Paul makes this point rather nicely in verse 12 of 1 Corinthians. Listen again – "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— the work of each builder will become visible." Did you notice the ordering of materials? Paul begins with gold and precious stones, which, metaphorically speaking, is certainly quality stuff when giving to the glory of God. But then he continues his list by mentioning the much less precious though very necessary stuff of wood, hay and straw. His point – in the end, the end being the day of Christ's return, even if all you've faithfully contributed to the building process is straw, it is every bit as precious to God as if you've been giving gold.

We measure the worth of what we give to God, don't we? I don't just mean the amount of the check in our offering envelopes or whether we are dropping a Washington

or a Grant or a Franklin in the offering plate. I mean we can all get to feeling like what we have to offer the church is not good enough quality. The Lord works in material ways, but we can get to feeling like we are not very precious building material. We can get to feeling like our prayers, our understanding of the Bible, our time and tithes to give aren't enough to really glorify God and advance the Gospel. In times like these, we point to who we consider to be the gold standards among us – the folks who give the most money, who give the most hours of their busy lives to the ministries of the church, who always seem to exhibit Christ's compassion, who can apply quotes of Scripture to every circumstance of life. I understand. I feel like straw a lot of times too.

This was particularly the case the day I preached what was, in my mind, truly an awful sermon during my internship in 1998 at 1,800 member Westminster Presbyterian in Wilmington, Delaware. I'd had repeated panic attacks about this in the week before the sermon was due for delivery. The rubber of my academic training was burning on the road of real life ministry and it smelled awful to me. But Sunday rolled right around all the same and the time came to stand up and deliver what I had in hand. And what I had in hand, to me, felt more like the stuff mixed in with the straw on the floor of the horse stable. I was mortified to have to deliver something so stinky from a much revered preacher's pulpit. What felt like desecration to me, however, proved, in God's amazing grace, to be gold after all. I realized this when a lady greeted me after the service and was smiling ear to ear. She told me quite emphatically how, during my sermon, she felt the foundations of the church and of her heart quake. Wow. God does do the building!

I learned right then and there that I am indeed to do as Paul exhorted. In the task of preaching, and every other task for the church, I am to use whatever I've got to give (so long as I choose it carefully, meaning, with God-glorifying intent) to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Judgments about worth are in His gracious, redeeming care and under the auspices of God the master architect.

God does not rest, but keeps laboring in love for the upbuilding of his people in Jesus Christ. And this laboring is done through our hands and hearts. Every bit of brick and mortar of our work for the church, and really, for love of neighbors as ourselves, needs to be faithfully understood as an addition to the foundation already laid in person, in a material way, by God in Jesus.

Just look all around at the ways we give what we've got. Just here in this sanctuary today, even! God's fingerprints are on the harp, on the organ, on the vocal

chords of singing servants. They are all over the bulletin insert about our upcoming church picnic and the kick-off of our Rotation Workshop Sunday School. I barely have to dust in prayer to discern that God's been back there in the narthex, carefully drawing up plans for a bathroom as well as installing, at last, a fire alarm system.

In fact, when I shake your hands this morning ... you probably need to know that I'll not only be greeting you with Christian love, but, yes, I'll be checking to feel the grip of the grace of God building up the Gospel right through you. And, as I see it, there just isn't much that's really mysterious about that! Amen.