

"Building from the Ground Up"

Psalm 127; Luke 6:47-49

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 19, 2014 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One of my favorite Cary Grant movies is the 1948 film, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. Here's the story of a couple and two daughters who live in an apartment in New York City. For a rented place it's nice enough, yet obviously too small for a growing family and there's no yard.

Jim Blandings has a successful career as an advertising writer in Manhattan, but he longs for a place of his own. In one scene he looks wistfully at a magazine promoting life in rural Connecticut, then he goes back to the work at hand. That dream stays with him, though.

Finally the day comes when he and his wife make that drive from the city out into the country. Well, they find a house and even buy it, but it turns out to be so old and decrepit that nothing can be done except tear it down and begin anew. Despite their disappointment, they both agree they have one very important asset: the prettiest property in the whole state of Connecticut.

They work with an architect and design the home they've always desired. Then they get started with the construction, but everything goes wrong that possibly can and all the costs are more than expected. Repeatedly Jim Blandings is ready to throw in the towel. Finally the house is finished and it is all they have dreamed about. Despite all the unplanned expenses, Blandings admits, "There are somethings you buy with your heart and not with your wallet."

This became a successful film because it struck a common chord with most people. The desire to provide a conducive place for family life is deeply ingrained in most of us. Besides, in 1948 many post-war couples were just getting on their feet and the housing shortage was beginning to abate. That dream house now seemed more a possibility than ever. The release of this movie was timely, but its producers were well aware of that.

A home is important for most people—I know it is for me. Oh, sometimes I wonder if it's worth it all, but I really know that whatever the time and trouble I wouldn't want to give it up. This is one of those very important things in life that's worth the price. Dollars can't be your only consideration.

Our psalm reading for today also speaks about building, but in a bit more profound way than a movie script. Its concern is the foundation we build upon, and what gives strength and form to everything else. "Unless the Lord builds the house," it begins, "those who build it labor in vain." But then, what does this mean? How can the Lord build something? God is not like a workman who can take a beam and join it to another and, after a while, see that the dwelling has taken shape. But then the passage continues.

"If the Lord does not protect the city, it does no good for the sentries to stand guard. It is useless to work so hard for a living, getting up early and going to bed late, for the Lord provides for those he loves while they are asleep."

In Hebrew, "to build a house" can mean either "to construct a dwelling" or "to raise a family." The psalmist declares that to attempt to build anything worthwhile without God is utterly futile. Even with the best building skills or watchfulness or hard work the end result will never be what it could be without God's blessing.

This psalm tells us that without the Lord at your center, you will never know what it is to be fully alive, to fully realize your potential. That is a place only God can fill, and all our attempts to replace the Lord with other substitutes will be in vain.

Yes, you can build your life on wealth and expect this to be your foundation, but that is no guarantee you will find serenity and happiness. Or you can build your life on power and the ability to dominate others. Yet again, you may find only misery in such an elevated place. Prestige? That certainly seems desirable, but fame has a way of putting you on top one day and dumping you the next.

I read a biography recently about Howard Hughes. He had money and power and prestige, but he was only able to build a house that turned out to be an empty place. The last two years of his life were anything but happy. Although he had the means to be anywhere he wanted, he lived in small, dark hotel rooms. With these cramped places as his home, Howard Hughes conducted business and watched old movies. Some films he saw more than a hundred times, mostly alone. He never went outside. The drapes over the windows were taped shut.

The man who could have afforded the finest clothes usually wore pajamas and an old bathrobe. Although he had four doctors on his staff, he often refused to follow their advice; he would not even allow them to give him a full examination. His eyesight was bad, but he would not wear glasses.

His cramped quarters were untidy, for he always kept stacks of newspapers and magazines. Hughes was terrified of germs and he would never shake hands with anyone. When a barber came to cut his hair he made the man scrub like a surgeon preparing for an operation.

This rich man could have had his food prepared by the finest of chefs, but in fact he ate very sparingly. For a long period he dined only on canned chicken soup. He like one flavor or ice cream so much that a dairy made it up for him in 300 gallon batches.

Howard Hughes controlled an empire worth more than a billion dollars. He owned hotels, an airline, restaurants, apartment houses, television stations, and many other businesses and properties. What a "house" he had built. But he found little pleasure or fulfillment in it. He had everything in life but, in a way, he had nothing. And that's what the psalmist is trying to convey.

The major thing that set the Jewish people apart from the rest of the world was their faith. Other ancient peoples were religious, too, but the Jews did not worship God as an after-thought—as others did with their deities—but they put their Creator in the very center of their

lives. God was not some remote abstraction, but a close and vital force that was in the midst of everyday life.

Jesus came and built upon that understanding by further showing the love and care that is God's nature. He willingly did this on our behalf even though it would lead to death on a cross. God's love in Jesus proved to be so strong that even what appeared to be the end could not halt the progression of the Kingdom.

Today this is a very special day in our history. It is the 36th anniversary of Highlands as a congregation. Many new church starts are never successful in getting established. Others fail in their first five years from a variety of pressures. Still others make it to their teens and twenties, but then break down from within. In some ways you could say that we have defied the odds | simply because we exist today. Yet, the fact that we are still here may not indicate all that much about tomorrow. To continue, our foundation as a congregation must be far stronger than the walls which hold up our building.

We have come through some rather challenging times in our life together. There have been periods of confusion and drift, of voids in leadership, and hurt feelings. There have been occasions when we have pulled together and others where we have pulled apart. And there are certainly times when the very best was required from us and that is what we were able to give.

On occasions like today we stop and think about who we are as a congregation, about our assets and our deficits. At anniversaries we look back to where we've been and attempt to look forward to where we might be going. We recall all those persons who have been a part of our fellowship and have contributed to its life and welfare.

Everything that has gone before is the heritage that we have today. But where we've been, or where we are now, will make little impact on our future unless we are able to keep God at the center of our congregational life. The only way to do that is to have God as the foundation of our individual lives. Highlands is only as strong as we are. If your faith and mine is not personally central, then Highlands' future will not be bright either.

This is, indeed, a day for thanksgiving. It is celebration and joy. It's also a time for reflection, of examining ourselves to see upon what we are built, and make adjustments if needed. It is a time to remind ourselves, "If the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless." Or looking at it in the positive: If the Lord does build the house, the work of the builders will prove to be useful and productive.

The aggregate of our personal lives will largely determine the days ahead for us as a congregation. If we all strive to keep God at our center, the church can thrive as a beacon of love and hope to the world. There's never been a time when this is more needed.

Together we are the church, but God must be our foundation.