

“God, In the House”
Psalm 127
Andrew Foster Connors
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 8, 2009

Praying on the playground of Eutaw-Marshburn Elementary yesterday, not far from where drugs are sold, needles are used, and young men have died from gunshot wounds, I heard this Psalm again. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” Unless the Lord is involved in this city, 300 murders a year will continue to be the acceptable target. Unless the Lord is involved in this city, drugs will continue to be the major employer for some neighborhoods. Unless the Lord is called on for help, nighttime will continue to be the time when neighbors hide inside.

We are not the first ones who have lifted up this psalm in the face of social challenge. Ben Franklin famously quoted this psalm at the Constitutional Convention that gave rise to our nation. In an appeal that was inconsistent with his skeptical nature, he pleaded with his colleagues to open their deliberations each day with prayer. “Without God’s concurring aid,” he said, “we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel.” Years later, John F. Kennedy prepared to use the psalmist’s words in a speech he was planning to give before in Dallas in 1963. His undelivered speech appealed for divine guidance as a check against the potential for the immoral use of force by this growing empire.

Unlike their pleas for help in times of optimism, expansion, and hope, these words come to us at a time when we are more resigned to the status quo, or resigned to our inability to change it, beaten down by the seeming intractability of persistent problems. This is not for want of effort on the part of many. As Emily pointed out two weeks ago, many of you are already involved, if not over-committed to children in schools, projects here and around the globe, your family, your work, our church. Doing more is not necessarily what is possible or even needed from many of us.

What seems to be missing from our public life together is a clear vision for where God would have us go. I’d like to know how many living wage jobs we would need to give everyone looking for employment a legitimate job and then figure out how to get there. I’d like to hear our leaders declare that youth murder is unacceptable and then we can outline steps for eliminating it altogether. I’d like to hear what it would take to rebuild the city over a twenty year period and set annual targets for getting there. I’d like to see the pipeline from cradle to prison re-routed from cradle to school to employment and then agitate for what it would take to get us there. I’d like to hear God’s vision for this communal house fleshed out in concrete terms so we can imagine what life could be like according to God’s wishes.

Instead, I can already hear that cynical voice in my own head saying, “it’s impossible to create enough living wage jobs for everyone looking for employment.” I can hear that resigned voice saying, “Murder is almost like a genetic disorder that runs in the family of some children in our city.” I can feel the voice of capitulation speaking, “There’s not enough money to rebuild the city.” “The cradle to prison pipeline is too established to be altered.”

It's possible that it's not really cynicism but *reality* that speaks. The *reality* that jobs do not appear out of thin air. The *reality* that a drug economy can't be overturned by well wishes. The *reality* that a cradle to prison pipeline can't be shifted by the good intentions of a few. The *reality* that we only have so many hours in a day, we only have so many more hours beyond the immediate children or immediate employees or immediate people who are in our charge. There is only so much we can do.

Maybe settling for teaching 50 kids to read instead of all of them is realistic. Maybe settling for 299 murders instead of zero is *realistic*. Maybe settling for rebuilding one neighborhood instead of an entire city is *realistic*. Maybe settling for taking back one playground at one school is *realistic*. Maybe settling for these things is being honest about what we are capable of doing, what we are capable of changing.

We make those concession all the time and not just in our public life. We settle for a rat-race schedule that is less than what we dream about. We settle for work that is less than fulfilling. We settle for a relationship that is less than what we really desire. We settle in so many places for a reality that is less than what we hope in the name of what is realistic, in the name of what we are capable of changing, of what we are capable of living.

But standing on the playground yesterday I was hard pressed to consider which child on that playground I would be willing to sacrifice to the streets. Which child would I be willing to relinquish to the gangs or the drugs? Which 300 residents would I be willing to give up to murder? Which families would I be willing to let go hungry next year? Which neighborhoods am I okay with leaving to the drugs, the gangs, and the rats?

That's what we do which we shrink our vision to levels we can reach. We concede that there are some children who have to be sacrificed to the streets. That there are some children who have to be offered up to the gangs and the drugs. There are some residents who must be given over to murder. There are some families that have to go hungry next year. There are some neighborhoods that are ruined beyond repair.

Because we know enough about ourselves or our city to know that we can work ourselves into the grave and we still can't pull the jobs out of thin air. We can give every waking hour to need and we still won't be able to change the drug economy. We can sell all we have and give our lives volunteering in the prisons and we still won't be able to change the cradle to prison pipeline. There is only so much we can do.

Franklin and Kennedy seemed to know that well. But instead of capitulating to the realities of their own limitations, instead of lowering the bar to levels they could be sure that we would reach, instead of cranking down the dreams of their hearts and the communities they served, they appealed to a higher power. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." "unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain." "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives *sleep* to God's beloved."

I imagine that, to some of you this appeal to God's provision sounds like escapism. Like an excuse. Laying at the feet of some imagined deity our own inability to make positive change. "Christ has no hands, but our hands," the prayer goes. "No feet but our feet." Nothing will get done if we don't do it ourselves. I suppose that, for some, calling on God *is* an excuse to do nothing more than pray with empty words that are not backed up with willing hearts and hands.

But I have come to believe in my life that the opposite is more often true. It's the absence of faith that leaves me bitter and cynical; it's the absence of faith in a God who demands the best house for all God's children that leads us to give up on dreams that we had for our community, or my family, or my life. It's the absence of faith that leads us to trade in our hopeful, engaged outlook for passive, detached, dispirited complaint. It's the absence of a confidence in God's provision, God's ability to take our dead ends and turn them into new beginnings, that undermines our ability to act.

Unless the Lord builds the houses that we live in, the work is too much. Unless the Lord builds the city where we live, we do labor in vain. Unless the Lord builds the church that we embody together, the community will not flourish. Because the work is too much, the challenges are too great, the problems too complex for us to do anything significant without God's help.

Faith in God's power to do what we cannot do on our own doesn't lead to passivity – at least not for most of the people who come to this house of worship. It's what keeps the fire burning in your belly. It's what keeps us holding out and working for the ideal for the city, or for your family, or for your vocation, or for your life even when we know there are limits to what we can do on our own. It's what enables us to keep dreaming of a city where everyone who wants a living wage job has access to one, to feel holy outrage every year that the murder rate doesn't go down, to insist on a fresh look at opportunities for young people even before we know how we're going to get there. It's what enables us to toil during the day and still get the rest that dreamers need knowing that we're not the only ones constructing a new city, or a new church, or a new family, or a new world. It's what sustains you when you can't find your way on your own.

I don't really know what, if anything, will come out of the gathering at Eutaw-Marshburn yesterday. I know that our church has been involved there again and again. Some of you have been there just about every week. Things have not always gone the way we wanted them to. I know that cleaning up a playground won't shut down the drug dealing that surrounds the school, or teach a child to read. I know that praying for God's protection for children isn't the same thing as taking steps to provide for their safety.

But I'll keep showing up there to stand alongside some of you. I'll keep calling on the name of the Lord to guide our feet in the city, to guide my feet in my family, to guide my feet in everywhere that we go. Not because I am confident that we can change everything that needs to be changed. Not because I know even where to begin sometimes. I'll keep showing up because everytime I see the face of a child, I know that God is there before I arrive on the scene. Everytime I see a wound on the street, or a wound in someone's heart, there I can see God pacing off the foundations for a house that every human being deserves. God is beckoning people like you and me who don't want to live a cynical life, who don't want to end up closed, cold and bitter, who don't want to settle for torn up city, a defeated relationship, or a life whose

flame has been stamped out; who want to embrace a future that is beyond what we know we can achieve on our own. I'll keep showing up to give and to receive not much more than a prayer for God to come and help us build a new home.