



November 13, 2022

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Psalm 127

**Building a House of Faith, Hope, and Love:
Unless the Lord Builds the House**



The 127th Psalm offers a powerful metaphor for the foundations on which this church should be laid and this year's stewardship theme draws inspiration from it. We know that *unless the Lord* is the one building our congregation brick by brick, our labor is indeed in vain. And we would do well to examine this house we have built to see whether it is a home for encountering God or simply a grand edifice.

This summer Wendy and I spent a marvelous week in in the Berkshires. I conducted sermon research in the morning and in the afternoon, we explored the area and we especially enjoyed touring the cottages of the Choate family, a renowned New York lawyer from the late 19th century and that of the illustrious author, Edith Wharton.

Our guides were both excellent as were the grounds and homes, but the Choate visit was much more compelling.

The Edith Wharton Estate, while magnificent, was mostly straight lines and rigid accommodations. In fact, the receiving area at the Wharton home felt more like a barrier to nowhere. You could only see the grander part of the home if you were invited up the stairs. It had the look and feel of a fortress (Like our front steps of the church used to look until the recent addition of the lovely, welcoming plants on the front steps.).

On the other hand, the Choate rooms looked lived in and inviting, and were filled with stories of family and friends. It was not simply an imposing edifice; it had cedar shake shingles on the exterior of the house to make it feel more a part of the land rather than separate from it.

There was a unique grand oak on the grounds that majestically spoke of timeless beauty, elegance, and power. We discovered that the greatest landscape architect in the history of the world, Frederick Law Olmstead, of Central Park, the Biltmore Estate, and so much more, wanted to chop it down. Chop it down! So, they fired him! Olmstead was fired!

But this tree held a special memory. Before the house was built it was the only tree for miles. And as a family they would picnic under this tree and their eldest son Ruluff would climb it. Tragically he died of stroke his freshman year of college.

The tree was the foundational reason for building that home. They would never chop it down. Today as we think about building the house of Brick, I want to explore those sacred elements that we would never chop down, lest we lose our reason for being here and what makes this place a home of faith, rather than a museum of refinement.

Our stewardship theme, *Building a House of Faith, Hope, and Love*, will lead the way.

- Building a house of faith: namely, the traditions of our faith that what we have received from those who have gone before us; our heritage.
- Building a house of hope: we are a church filled with children, for in them lies hope for the future.
- Building a house of love: it is God's love that gathers us *now*; love brings the past and the future to the present.

A house of faith is one centered on worship of almighty God.

We are founded upon classic, sacred music. This music primarily serves to glorify God but knowing many of these compositions, despite being several centuries old, speak as powerfully to us today as they did at their first offering – perhaps even more – it underscores the enduring power of God and the sublimity of the human spirit. I cannot imagine those hearing Louis Vierne - *Toccata Op. 53 No. 6* could possibly realize what he had done.

We treasure this formality and reverence in our worship. We hold onto these things – a robed choir, a beadle, a procession – because this is one of the few places in this country that recognizes the majesty of God, the holiness of life, the grandeur of existence that a less-formal worship does not. But a house of faith realizes that our God is much wider than any single tradition.

So, if you read the bulletin and listen to the music, you have realized by now that Ray not only finds pieces of excellence and

reverence from the Western European tradition but pieces of excellence and reverence from a broad swath around the world, helping our faith grow ever richer, reflecting the abundant grace of our generous God.

We are founded upon the generosity of God which in turn has led many to be generous to Brick. God gave us the only Son. God reconciled and redeemed us. God created the world to give us the theater of life to glorify the divine we see in all creation.

Without a generous response to this good news, without your faithful response, we would not have a church. On this Stewardship Sunday we need to remember there is good news and there is bad news when it comes to our budget. The good news is we have all the funding we need to meet our goals...the bad news is it is still in your pockets! But all joking aside, your pledge is your thank you to God for all that you have generously been given.

Think about those who gave the funds to build this grand sanctuary or the sublime organ ...they did not give their leftovers to God. They gave generously so we could continue to build this house of faith, hope, and love. Or those who gave towards the Parish House, which houses our children. Our children...which leads us to our next building block...being a house of hope.

Jesus Christ through His life, death, and resurrection has reconciled us to God. He has given us this gift which we cannot lose, no matter how hard we try. This is known as the *Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints...Once Saved, Always Saved*. No matter how far we fall in this life and no matter how much we stumble, in some way God will pick us back up. Our hope

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is utterly assured because it relies not on my faithfulness or yours but the faithfulness of Christ. Our hope is in the Lord.

Brick *is* a hopeful church! A church that invests so much in children is one that believes that there will be a future. As a community we have our Sunday School program, Youth Choirs, the Day School, and more. We treasure that history and yet it still seems to me we vastly underappreciate the significance of what it can mean to us and the city and all children! This school meets the hope of so many. It is God's command that we spread this hope wider, beyond the Upper East Side.

And it has to do with understanding the very nature of God.

My colleague in Spartanburg and the Minister of Music, Holt Andrews, were struck by this truth while in Haiti. There is a school there filled with wonderfully creative and imaginative children and the parents' ability to keep their clothes pressed and clean defies belief. For their houses are simply cinder block walls and dirt floors with no washing machine. The young ladies' hairstyles are glorious, but it does not come easy – the mothers spend an hour each morning heating a spoon over an open fire so they can wrap it in their hair to make the exquisite curls.

As Holt was visiting with these laughing, inquisitive children and learning of the parents' careful, painstaking love, he realized that, like those parents, God loves these children just as much as God loves any child. Surely there is a path to create this same hopeful future for more and more children in New York. Summer steps is a fantastic start but there is more we can do. To

be a church of hope is one that hopes for the future in which all children will someday have as outstanding of an experience as they do here. A church a love is one that works desperately to make it happen.

Which brings us to our final building block as we grow: a house of love. It is this love that brings the treasures of traditions past of our ancestors and the hope we set for the future for our children into the loving presence we share across generations in our time here. For those who have been at the Faithful Table you have seen the generations collide with glorious kinetic life.

Becoming more and more of a church of love over time will build this house. For true love, selfless love, commands respect and attraction. Genuine kindness is incredibly powerful. This was Jesus who helped everyone, respected the outcast and others saw it and they were drawn to Him.

Though we are a formal church, we are also a loving church – a rare combination!

It is love that turns a house into a home. Sadly, Edith Wharton and her husband's bond was not founded upon love and so it did not last, and the house quickly changed hands. A house built on love is like that Choate home. One that creates precious memories for every member of the family. One that remembers and misses people when they are not there. It is an inviting house, in which everyone has a place.

I have seen this treasuring of one another in this place. It is an oasis of care and consideration in a city that, though magnificent, sometimes feels isolating and callous.

I experienced exactly what this love feels like last week. As I was standing on the elevator going to my office on the third floor, a group of children came aboard. The teacher asked me to move to the middle of the elevator. I was confused but happy to comply. The children filed in most expeditiously and obediently around the edge of the elevator, and when they had finished, I was surrounded by the children. They looked into my eyes trying to remember where they had seen me before, suddenly one of the children said, "Hi, Tom." Then another, "Hi Tom!" Then suddenly they all started chanting "Tom, Tom, Tom!" How marvelous!...

A house of faith, hope and love. As you consider your pledge and help us to build this place into a home, remember a house of love is less like the Edith Wharton home, and more like the Choate house, in which memories of the past are honored, new people are welcomed in.

May we all give as generously as our God as we build an enduring house of faith, hope, and love for all. Amen.