

“Buildings from God”

2 Corinthians 4:13—5:1

The apostle Paul was a skilled master builder.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, he said that he “laid a foundation” in the city of Corinth, and then someone else began to build on it (1 Corinthians 3:10). Paul believed that “each builder must choose with care how to build,” whether they use gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw. But in any good Christian construction project, said Paul, the “foundation is Jesus Christ” (vv. 10-12).

In the city of Detroit, a development of tiny homes is being built on a Christian foundation. The developer is a group called Cass Community Social Services, which began during the Depression when Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church opened a soup kitchen. In the 1950s, the church’s pastor expanded the congregation’s social services, creating an evening program, a free Bible class and a senior’s program.

Over the years, Cass began to work with people with developmental disabilities, and many of these disabled members continue to serve as ushers and acolytes today. In the 1980s, the church began to work with the homeless, providing a safe place for people to take a shower, do laundry, use the telephone, and look for work.

Today, Cass is focusing on the building of tiny homes to provide housing for people in need. According to *The Christian Century*, “each house is a single-family home of 250 [to] 400 square feet, on its own lot with a lawn.”

Yes, the homes are really very small, about one-seventh the size of the average new home. A front porch or rear deck add a bit more to the living space.

The first phase of construction is now wrapping up. Moving into the homes are single people and couples who are “living on little income: senior citizens, college students and other young people who have aged out of foster care, and people who were previously homeless or incarcerated.”

The homes are built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and they give people dignity. These tiny homes are rented and then owned by their residents, an investment “which fosters pride and responsibility.” The pastor who directs the project in this bleak expanse of Detroit says, “To have new houses going in is really exciting.”

They are buildings from God.

Paul advances his construction theme in the second letter to the Corinthians, and he continues to build with care on the foundation of Jesus Christ. But instead of focusing on the construction of a Christian community in Corinth, he draws our attention to what God is raising up in us.

“We know,” he says, “that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence” (2 Corinthians 4:14). Paul is not focusing on the raising of walls to give us shelter in this life. Instead, he is pointing us toward the resurrection, which will raise us into everlasting life.

This is a truly radical focus because shelter is one of our most important daily needs. A neuroscientist named Nicole Gravagna has developed a list of six human needs, based on 75 years of psychology, neuroscience, and sociology.

At the top of the list is *food*, which provides calories and a variety of nutrients.

Next comes *water*, giving the body the ability to process food and remove wastes.

Third most important is *shelter*, which protects the human body from blazing sun, freezing temperatures, wind, and rain. That's why the tiny homes of Detroit are so important, protecting human skin and organs from extreme temperatures.

Number four on the list is *sleep*, which is best experienced in the protection of a shelter.

These top four human needs will not come as a surprise to anyone, because we all know how important it is to have food, water, shelter, and sleep. Jesus himself commands us to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty (Matthew 25:35). But in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wants us to look past these earthly needs and to focus on the resurrection that God is offering us as we follow the path of Jesus.

“So, we do not lose heart,” says Paul. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Paul realizes that our “outer nature” is going to waste away, whether it is our physical body maintained by food, water and sleep, or the physical home that provides shelter for our bodies. Whether we live in a mansion made of stone or a tiny home constructed of wood, it will not last forever.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” concludes Paul, “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (5:1). At the end of our life, our body and our home are nothing more than an “earthly tent.” No matter how well it is built, it will be destroyed. At that point, we move into “a building from God . . . eternal in the heavens.”

The apostle Paul was a skilled master builder. In fact, when Paul arrived in Corinth, he stayed with a married couple named Aquila and Priscilla. The book of Acts tells us “they worked together — by trade they were tentmakers” (Acts 18:3). So, Paul earned his living in Corinth by making tents . . . temporary, earthly shelters.

Paul knew that people needed shelter. He would probably approve of the tiny homes being built in Detroit today, innovative solutions to the affordable housing problem in many communities. He might even accept the fancy kitchens, luxurious bathrooms and bonus rooms that are so popular in new home construction. But he would want us to remember that no matter where we live, our time on earth is transient. We should focus on the “building from God” that will be our eternal home.

That’s why Paul’s words to the Corinthians are actually in harmony with the last two of the six human needs identified by neuroscientist Nicole Gravagna: *Other people* and *novelty*.

Yes, need number five is “other people.” Gravagna says that “regular connection to others allows us to maintain a sense of well-being.” We cannot thrive in isolation, which is why hiding in a huge McMansion is not a healthy way to live. Better to sit on the porch of a tiny home and say hello to your neighbors, or join a small group at church, or sing in a choir, or work alongside others in our many Divinity ministries.

Volunteer to serve on one of our Divinity boards whose co-directors are being installed this morning. We have yet to identify the one who is going to serve alongside Libbi Chilia as co-director of our Youth Board. Our Youth and Libbi are not scary at all. God is calling you. Are you listening?

Being connected to other people is key to our emotional and spiritual health. That is why Paul tells the Corinthians that “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). God has so arranged the body, says Paul, “that there be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another” (v. 25). Because one of our greatest human needs is other people, God has placed us in a community called the body of Christ.

But that’s not all. The sixth and final human need is *novelty*. “Novelty creates the opportunity to learn and the ability to fail,” says Gravagna. “Without regular novelty, motivation wanes and a healthy sense of well-being is lost.” Since novelty is anything that is new, original, or unusual, Paul would connect novelty to our eventual home: “a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1).

When it comes to buildings, there is nothing more novel.

Yes, our final human need is having something new, original, or unusual to pursue. And that precisely is why Paul counsels us to look forward with faith and hope. “We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (v. 18).

So, what do these buildings tell us about what is essential to life, on earth and in heaven? First, we are challenged to care for each other in this life and to work together to make sure that everyone has adequate food, water, shelter, and sleep. Paul wants members of the church to “have the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25) and remember that all of the commandments of God are summed up in the words, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:9).

Our Divinity Paul has embodied St. Paul’s words over the past 5 years as President of our congregation. Through his calm and committed leadership, Paul has motivated us to “Have the same care for one another” and beyond these walls “to love our neighbors as ourselves.” I personally thank Paul for being a brother and partner in ministry. I am confident Tony and I will have the same kind of relationship.

But at the same time, we need to realize that everything in this world will eventually pass away, so we should live by faith and focus on the building from God that is eternal in the heavens. This means trusting Jesus instead of the leaders of this world. It involves working for the common good, instead of pursuing only personal success. It includes valuing what cannot be seen — honesty, integrity, sacrifice, love — instead of the things of this world that can be seen. Remember, says Paul, that “what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

At the end of life, we will all go home, and it won’t be to a tiny home or a spacious mansion. Instead, it will be to a house not made with hands. So, get ready for it.

May the peace of God . . .

#652 – Built on a Rock