

## *Vain Independence*

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Psalm 127

*“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”*

### *Movement 1 – Our Nagging Anxiety*

There is always something to do. There is always something that we could be doing better, that we could clean up, or that we could improve. There is always something to do. Do you know about this feeling? Do you know about this feeling of a need to improve, or a need to do better? It is that feeling when your grades are falling in school, and you know they shouldn't be. It is that feeling when your performance at work has not been the best, and you know it could be better. Even in our faith life, it is that feeling when you are praying, and you think your prayers could be better, more profound, or maybe just longer. When you walk down the street and you notice the well manicured lawns of all the houses until you reach your home, and you feel like you could do better with your own landscaping and horticultural endeavors. It is that feeling of anxiety because you are falling short of your potential – have you ever heard your parents tell you that speech?

I have been lured into the place of “lawn-anxiety.” Many of the homes on our street have nice lawns, with good presentation. But our lawn is not the best. The grass is always in need of a mow, the path needs to be pruned, the back yard could use some work – I have not spent a lot of time working on the yard. Every now and again I feel a little self-conscious about my yard, and I try to do something to change, improve, or at least bring the yard up to par with the rest of the houses around us. I feel anxious that others may be looking at my yard with a “tsk” on their breath, and a furrow on their brow. Some day I'll have to move the old 79' Pontiac LTD off of the cement blocks and make the yard look a little better. Some day I'll have to accept the fact that not all wild flowers are actually flowers – they are weeds. Some day I'll have to accept the fact that a covering of leaves from the trees this year will not protect the grass from acid snow. Some day I have to accept that patches of dirt does not add color and variety to the yard. Someday I will have to work hard and bring my yard back up to its potential.

When Solomon built the temple of Jerusalem, he was reacting to anxiety, to pressure around him, as well. Other countries had temples for their gods. Other nations had somewhere to go and reflect their faith for the sake of the nation. Temples were places where pep rallies were held when nations rivaled. So Solomon built a temple for the Lord, for the pride of Jerusalem, and for the assurance that Israel was just as good as all the other countries surrounding it. It may have been around that time when Psalm 127 was written. Commentators tell us that this is a part of a longer section of “wisdom psalms,” that may be attributed to Solomon; or at least attributed to his experiences. When Solomon was anxious to build a “home” for God to keep up with the Babylonian Joneses, the wisdom of this psalm was penned, spoken, and shared. The psalm speaks to Solomon's anxiety. Yet before we focus more on the biting and challenging wisdom of the psalm, let's imagine and conceive the anxiety Solomon might have been feeling, the anxiety we often feel when we look at what we could and should be doing. There are so many demands around us, there are so places where we can spend a little more time, a

little more energy, and we are pulled in every direction with rising anxiety. Imagine feeling like the “scream” in Munch’s classic painting. You are surrounded by all these demands, pulled at all ways for improvement and feeling the anxiety rising up within you, and you want to place your hands on your face and follow the title of the painting. Reinhold Niebuhr claimed that anxiety was a precondition to sin, and we are called to wonder what kind of sin could come from such anxiety aside from breaking down. We are moved to consider what could bring us to sin from the demands of standards, of expectations, all of which lead to anxiety. It is a warning we cannot take lightly, because we all face a lot of anxiety to improve. So then we face a lot of opportunity to sin. But what else are we to do? After all, we all have something we could or should do better than we are right now.

### *Movement 2 – Take Pride in Your Work*

So we work a little harder, we spend a little more time in what needs to be done, and we find ourselves proud of what we do. Sometimes we feel pride in our work, and why not? Why not feel proud of the hard work, the sweat, and the effort you put in what you do? Where is the harm in feeling good about a positive reaction to the anxiety in our lives? You feel like your grades are falling and you work a little harder and raise your grades – so be proud of yourself. Maybe you felt like you didn’t play well or sing well the week before, so you work a little harder, you practice a little bit, and the next week your singing improves and you feel good about yourself – you feel proud. Maybe you have a big presentation coming up, and you are nervous about it. So you spend extra hours working, you spend extra time preparing your presentation, and when it is time to present, you nail your content and the information. The anxiety was enough to motivate you, and you worked hard, and you are proud of yourself. I have been working on this patio for some time, and recently I have begun to put the bricks in the ground. I have to tell you, it looks good. I’m proud of my work, and why not. The only problem is that I end up stopping every row to step back and admire the work I did one row earlier – makes for very slow progress.

I imagine that when the temple was completed, when the pillars were standing tall for all to see, when the curtains were up, when the walls were finished, Solomon and the rest of the Israelites looked back with pride. Why not? They have put in a lot of time energy, they had spent the effort, and they had something good to show for it. They have finally built a house worthy of the Lord. They should be proud.

We all have those moments, like the cereal commercial where the one man is telling everyone that he lowered his cholesterol. He is proud of his achievements. He wants to tell the world about his achievements. We all have those moments when we want to walk around like kindergarten children saying “I did it!” We have things to be proud of, and maybe that isn’t a bad thing. Maybe we should take the words of Mike Tyson seriously when he said, “A lot of people don’t like themselves and I happen to be totally in love with myself.” Do you remember that 80s philosophy of “I’m Ok and You’re OK?” Maybe it is ok to feel that way. Look in the mirror and tell yourself that you are someone special.

Yet the psalm and the warning of Reinhold Niebuhr haunt me in my own place of pride. The psalm seems to warn us from such pride. Niebuhr makes the claim that pride is the basic root of all human sin. Niebuhr claims that our anxiety can lead either to a denial

of our responsibilities, or a prideful stand which he claims can be idolatrous or sinful. The psalm almost wags a finger at us, reminding us that in vain is our early rising and our going to bed late. The psalm tells us not to work hard, for in vain is our prideful work ethic. But why? Why would we be warned, challenged, or cautioned from a prideful stance in our own work. We put in our blood, our sweat and our tears (to reference a famous group), and we receive good results. We work hard to achieve what we have. So we should feel proud in the work that we do, shouldn't we?

### *Movement 3 – We become Buried in our Pride*

What is the danger but that our pride may overwhelm us? Our pride may end up swallowing us, taking over us, and pushing us beyond what we can truly do in our lives. There are so many ways we can fall into this place of danger. Maybe we are proud of our performance, but now we feel that we have to do better all the time, so we find ourselves working harder and harder. We feel like we need to always be improving and we eventually burn ourselves out. Maybe I some day finish my patio, and then I look around and fiddle with the shrubbery, and then I tinker with the front cut of the grass, and eventually I find myself engrossed in my yard, neglecting my studies, neglecting my work, and neglecting my family. My pride in my yard can become idolatry. I have seen churches that look for ways to continually grow and grow. They work hard to become a church of 1,000 and then reach for 5,000, and then 10,000 and eventually you wonder if their pride in their identity as a church has overtaken their love and passion for Christ. You wonder if they are worshipping themselves as a church or if they are worshipping Christ.

Or maybe you know someone who won't let go of the reigns because of pride. This is the person who always makes the apple pie for the dinners, this is the person who always trims the tress of the church, or this is the person who always tells the opening joke for meetings. They are good at what they do, but when someone else comes in and offers to help, or to give them a break, the individual gets anxious, nervous, and defensive. This is their territory, this is the place where they find their pride, and now their pride is threatened.

When Solomon built the temple he did it at the expense of the Israelites. They were highly taxed, they were conscripted into labor, and they were pushed to the limit. The temple was a glory to look at, it was a beautiful thing, but at what expense? At what cost? And now, Solomon had to protect his temple, improve his temple, to be sure that his pride continued. His devotion was pulled away from God and towards the stone and mortar he was upon which he was so focused.

Our hard work is not bad, but our pride can drive us to a place where we fall to exhaustion and idolatry. Our pride in some cases is warranted, but it can drive us to a place of vain independence from all around us, including God. I will plan the mission trip without anyone else's help, because I am too proud of my abilities and feel that no one will do as well. I will paint the walls, because I am too proud to let others help, and feel that no one will do as well. Like the cliché of fathers competing over Christmas decorations, seeing which house will look better. Each has to one-up the other, and both end up with gaudy, overwhelming, and ridiculous displays of Christmas kitsch. Our pride can blind us to others around us.

Or, the more dangerous, or serious place where pride can bring us is that point when we replace God with our pride. Niebuhr claims that this is the sin of pride; we replace the image of God with the image of humanity. We see a need and we feel that we have to fix that need; showing little to no faith in God. When I receive pastoral phone calls, I am always pulled towards finding a solution for the person's problem, not praying to God for help and direction. My pride in my pastoral presence pulls me to fix things, not to trust in God.

We see work that needs to be done, and we feel that we have to do it. A major temptation of pastors is the feeling that we are the ones who are supposed to grow a church, save a church, or start a church. When we get together, we start swapping stories about how many souls we have saved. Church members talk about ways they can save other people. Solomon built a house for the Lord to dwell. We build houses for God to dwell, and then we step back and look at the great work we have done, the salvation we have spread, the successful ministry we caused and we have replaced God with the image of ourselves.

But then what if the church doesn't grow? When if people aren't saved? What if we provide a service to the hungry and no one comes? Then we have failed. Then we have come short and we hold ourselves responsible. Someone calls the office who is distraught, who is in a dangerous place, who is beside him or herself, and our reaction is to fix them, to save them, but what if we can't. If we do that for every need that comes across our door, we will burn out. If we hold ourselves completely responsible for the salvation of others, we will burn ourselves out. If we are so proud in this church, in our identity as members of LMBC, that all our focus is towards the institution of this church, we will burn ourselves out. Our pride, our vain independence will blind us to the presence of God. Our pride will push us to look only to ourselves. Our pride will overwhelm us.

#### *Movement 4 – Discarding the Vain Independence*

We need to trust God. We need to let God do the work. We need to remember that we can't save people. We need to trust God. We can't assure someone's salvation. We can't read the heart of our neighbor, our friend, our brother, or our sister. We can't save people. We need to trust God.

We can't make people join a church, and we should not presume to manipulate one's emotion or experience into needing the feeling they have when they are praising Jesus. We can't build a house worthy of God. We can't claim to be the best church worthy of God. God is in the small space as well as the large cathedral. God is with the fiery as well as the cool. As we gather in worship in this space, in our style, we need to trust that God will be with us, not because of anything that we have done. We need to trust God.

We can't claim to own or control God. We can force the Holy Spirit to move, to grow, or to affect people. I'm going to say this one more time – we can't save people, we can't save the church, we can't even save ourselves. This vain sense of independence, this protestant work ethic, this pride that drives us need to be shed, needs to be thrown to the side, and need to fall at our feet. Have you seen the movie *Tootsie*? In that movie, Dustin Hoffmann dresses up like a woman and becomes very popular on a daytime Soap. There is one scene in the movie when Hoffmann's character, live on television, in the

show where his female persona is acting, takes off his wig, his makeup, and reveals his true self. It is a moment when he sheds a false persona that has been carrying him for some time. It is a moment when he becomes the true and real person he is.

This is what the psalm is calling and challenging us to do. This psalm is challenging us to stop trying to get more done by rising early and going to be late and to trust God. We are in vain when we watch trends or indicators and try to assume where the greatest need for Christianity may be. We are in vain if we think that we can make this structure, as beautiful as it is, worthy of God's presence. We are in vain if we think that we can change the world. We are in vain if we think that we can make things better on our own. We need to stop worrying about the standards of the world. We need to stop looking at the yards next to us, at the Christmas lights across the street, we need to stop thinking we can and should do everything and anything, and let God do the work. We need to trust God. We need to let go of the responsibility, let go of the anxiety and no longer compare ourselves to others. Trust that we are ok, trust that our space is worthy because God makes it so. Trust God, let go of your pride, and let God do the work.

#### *Movement 5 – Trusting in God with our Anxiety*

Let go of your pride and trust God with your life. I don't think the psalm is calling us to not do any work. I don't think that God calls us to be lazy fat bastards (to reference a type of wine) with no motivation or desire to do any work at all. But I think we have to be cautious of thinking that we have to do the work, and that we can control the outcome. We need to work, we need to try, we need to be involved, but we need to let God lead us, let God guide and trust that God will take care of the results. It is a scary place to be sometimes because what we want and what God wants may be two different things. It is a scary place to be because sometimes the results that we measure are not the same as the results that God desires. It is a scary place to be because we may think that God is calling us to something we cannot do. But when you do let go of your pride, when you let go of your need to control and your need to do well, you jump into a new territory with a sense of surety, because God is with you. You don't jump in because you know you can succeed, because you have the best skill set, but because you have a passion, you have a call, but you also rest on the Lord to be with you through your work and your call. You still need to study and train – we don't want a doctor who rests all his or her laurels on passion. Yet we don't want a doctor who is in the field simply for the money or the prestige – we want someone who is passionate, we want someone who is called by God.

Dr. David Hilfiker was a doctor in the Midwest who was doing well. He was a general practitioner; he had a successful practice, and was probably seen as fairly competent in the medical field. But one day he moved with his family to a difficult, dangerous neighborhood just outside of Washington D.C. He moved into a homeless shelter where he felt called to serve as a doctor, and to live with the ones he was serving. He did not know what he could accomplish. He did not have a set of measurable outcomes to achieve. He did not have any track record to base his progress upon, but he went there knowing that God was also going with him, and trusting that God would stay with him and work through him. This is trusting in God.

Many of you serve through a board or a committee. Maybe you feel comfortable with the board. Maybe you feel it is a good match, or maybe you feel that you aren't sure it is a good match, and you wonder if you are right for the position. In either case, don't

think that you have to do all the work. Don't think that you have to make this church, your ministry, your service the best possible. Let God work through you, let God work with you, and let God lead you in all that you do.

Maybe you are thinking about getting involved in the ministries of this church a little more. Maybe you are thinking about serving with a board, or participating in another ministry, but you aren't sure if you have the skills necessary. Step back from your anxiety, and follow the passion, the urging that God has given to you. Know that you don't have to succeed or fail, and trust that God will be with you. You need not hold onto the anxious toil, you only need to walk with the Lord. This is for all of our life. Maybe you are still trying to decide what to do with your, life – follow the leading of God. Walk with Christ into your passion and trust that God will stay with you in your walk. Prepare and then let go and God will stay with you. Bonaventure called it a leap of faith when you have thought everything out, when you have walked through all of the training and intellectual steps you need, and you then have to let go of all your knowledge and trust and follow God. Let go of your pride, let go of your anxiety and trust in God.

#### *Movement 6 – The Shower of Blessings*

God will bless us! God will give us peace, and at the same time, God will give us glory, and we will not fail. It may be the glory small and subtle, or it may be glory large and powerful. God will give us glory, and we will not fail. It may be the glory of a smile of thanks for helping, or it may be the glory of a neighborhood changed. God will give us glory and we will not fail. All we have to do is trust God, follow God's lead and let God's will be done. When you think about the ministries before us, don't think about what needs to be done. Don't think about the positions that have to be filled, or the jobs that demand attention. Instead, think about your passion. What are you passionate about? What do you feel called to do with the church and with your life? Trust that your passion comes from the movement and the working of the Holy Spirit, and follow your passion. Get involved in that ministry and you will experience God's glory. It may be the glory of work well done, and feeling good about the work you have done for the Lord. It may be the glory of someone having the opportunity to eat a well cooked meal. It may be the glory of children playing and have a good time in a safe environment. It may be the glory of people getting together and praising God's name together. God will give us glory.

We can't create our glory. We can't force our own blessings. All we can do is trust in God for the glory and for the blessings. You may say that there are other things which need to be done around the church. You may claim that we have to work hard to save the church, and your passion will have to wait. You can't save the church. You can't build the church. You can't make the church. All you can do is follow God's call and trust in God. When everyone listens to God, when everyone follows God boldly and bravely, then the church will grow, the spiritual walls will be formed and strengthened and the house for the Lord will be made. But it will not be with our early rising, or going late to bed, but through the work of the Lord. Take a chance in following God, take a chance in working with God, and have that hope that no chance, no risk can beat the glory of the cross and the empty tomb.

My brothers and sisters, when you rest on God, and follow God with your passion you cannot fail. You may reach one person, but all of the heavenly hosts are celebrating

over that one person. You cannot fail. You may feel like the world works against you, but God is on your side and you cannot fail. Look to the cross, and remember that in our ministry and in our passion we are walking with Jesus. God has given us the glory of Christ resurrected, God has given us the hope of life beating death; we cannot fail.

Deacons are called to serve the people here in this family, and as they walk with Christ they will not fail. Trustees are called to work with the resources we have been given, this building, this land and all other gifts given to us by God, and as they walk with Christ in their work, they will not fail. The Board of Christian Education is called to encourage people of all ages to grow in faith and discipleship, and as they walk in Christ in their work, they will not fail. Education for mission calls us to look beyond these walls and reach out to the ends of the earth, and walking with Christ, they will not fail. The officers of this church are called to lead and guide the boards and the members with wisdom and vision, and as they walk with Christ, they will not fail.

We have so many ministries, so many opportunities before us – where is your passion, where is Christ calling you? Fear not failure, fear not a job poorly done, and trust in the Lord. All we can do is follow that glory. Let go of your pride. Let go of your need to become more than you are, and let God guide you, this church, all of humanity to the glory. And we shall not fail.

AMEN