

# LOSING SLEEP

a sermon by

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*Text: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."*

*Psalm 127:1*

As a student of history, I was often confused about the cause of World War I. In short, history records that the series of events leading to the all-out declaration of war began when, "on June 18, 1914, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife, in Sarajevo."

From this singular event, a complex sequence of other events unraveled and quickly threw Europe past the breaking point and into a state of general warfare.

Many historians have written about the varying circumstances that brought the onset of war. But, perhaps the most concise description comes from NBC Television's fictional President, Glenallen Walken, "Franz Ferdinand, who was the nephew of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, was killed by a group called the Black Hand, and because they were a Serbian nationalist society, the Empire declared war on Serbia. Then Russia, which was bound by a treaty, was forced to mobilize, which meant that Germany had to declare war on Russia. Then France declared war on Germany. And that was World War I; because the Emperor's nephew was killed."

The First World War came to its end, November 11, 1918. Though the formal peace treaty was still months away, an end to the violent hostilities, an Armistice, was declared to have begun on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. In many parts of the world, November 11, continues to be celebrated as "Armistice Day."

Such was the end of WWI; also known as "the great war" and "the war to end all wars." But, as we know all too well, other wars followed. And, so, in the 1950's the American observance of "Armistice Day" was converted to a day recognizing all veterans of American military service.

Our observance of "Veterans' Day" is a study in contrasts. We recognize individuals. But more than any one individual, we recognize and celebrate as a group, those who have served. Speaking generally, Americans

don't do well when it comes to recognizing a group; any group. We much prefer to single out individuals. Or, to be a bit more precise, we generally prefer to be singled out as individuals for our individual achievements.

## I.

As a society, we seem to hold in highest esteem, the individual. Each individual and his or her singular accomplishments seem to be more important to us than the continued success of any particular group. This morning, I shall give two examples of this – the way that many people tend to relate to the church, and the newest trends in charitable giving.

When it comes to the way that individuals relate to the life of the church, people can be divided into at least three very different categories.

1. There are those who have embraced the faith and life of the church.
2. There are also those that have outright rejected the faith of the church and who choose to have nothing to do with it.
3. But, then there is a third group; people who have not particularly embraced either the faith or the life of the church, and yet who also demand to be included in the church's important celebrations.

Garrison Keillor recently told the story of Confirmation in his fictional Lake Wobegon's Lutheran Church and of the personal musings of their pastor, the Reverend Inqvist.

“Pastor Inqvist handed out the Confirmation Certificates, smiling to himself. To think how little some of these children had bothered to learn about Scripture, despite his best efforts – three years, every Wednesday night Confirmation classes. He looks at these children and he knows that he's not going to see half of them ever again; until maybe they decide to get married or until they need to bury their parents. These children are going to go off and they are going to live in the cities. And they are going to live, in ten years, in sort of an alcoholic haze and try recreational drugs and have serial sex and probably wind up in some enormous ‘Praise Church’ out in the suburbs – these big gymnasiums where thousands of people come and there's no theology whatsoever; just a lot of really good feeling and a lot of really great hair and a lot of people who just like to be happy. And they stand up there holding hand-held microphones and singing. And people sing the songs off the screen. And they're happy, happy, happy songs; thanksgiving to the Lord for making our lawns so green and our hair so natural and bouncy and our breath so nice and sweet.”

These musings of Garrison Keillor may be a bit exaggerated. But, there remains some degree of honesty in his sentiment.

Within the life of the church, there are certain rites of the church. These are important rituals that mark and in some sense define who we are as a people. Confirmation and Christian Marriage are among these rites of the Church.

There are some – at times it seems to be many – who want to be on the periphery around the church, perhaps even speaking as harsh critics of life within the church. Of these loud critics, there are some – at times it seems to be many – who demand to be included in the rites of the church, mistaking these community-defining moments for an event to which they deserve a right to access.

We must never mistake the defining rites of the church for the very different civil rights of our community. Both may be important; but they are *not* interchangeable.

Even beyond the tales of the fictional Pastor Inqvist, there are many real-world examples of the way that we, as a society, promote the importance of the individual, as opposed to the importance of the group.

Consider also the new and growing trend in charitable giving. There was a day when people gave generously to support a particular religious or philanthropic organization. People gave to their church or to the United Way, and trusted the leadership of the recipient organization to make important decisions about the use of that money. Today, individuals tend to contribute money towards a specific purpose, perhaps even within a larger organization.

The latest trend is for individuals to create their own charitable trust, something not at all unlike the *Bill and Melinda Gates Trust* that has received so much publicity. Recent changes to the tax law have made this easier than ever before. Financial institutions have already created tools to accommodate each individual's charitable trust.

According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund was "the sixth-biggest donation-getter in 2005."

"This fund and others like it run like this: The mutual fund itself is organized as a charitable organization. You can open an account and give it a name like 'The Smith Family Fund' for instance. When you contribute to your account, you get a tax deduction for the amount of your contributions. You can leave the money there as long as you want and add to it whenever you want. It gets invested and grows. When you are ready to donate some or all of it, you simply let Fidelity know and the company cuts a check on your behalf. The charity knows it's you (or not, as you wish), but you don't get any additional tax break for the check that goes to the charity."

Americans continue to give very generously of their money. "Last year they donated some \$62.7 billion to the largest U.S. charities...."

But, this trend of directing the use of every dollar has two very important consequences. First, and I say this as the pastor of a church, it can become very difficult for a church to pay ordinary expenses like utilities, maintenance and salaries. The second important, and far more important consequence, is our individual attempt to steal the glory that rightfully belongs to God.

## II.

There is indeed a very serious crisis in the life of the church. The real crisis in all of this is not about "some enormous 'Praise Church' out in the suburbs;" although, the popularity of such happy, happy, happy places reveals something of the real crisis. The real crisis in all of this is not about money, giving patterns or charitable trusts; although, the way in which we tend to give money reveals something of the real crisis.

The real crisis in all of this is the ongoing effort by human beings to ascend to a place rightfully inhabited by God, and by God alone. We want to provide for our own happiness and security. We want the result of our work to be important, to make a difference in the world.

This crisis of faith was well-known among the ancient Hebrew people.

This morning I read the text of the 127<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Over time, this beautiful poem, received a superscription, "A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon."

This information was not part of the original text of the Psalm. But, it is important nonetheless. Psalms 120 through 134 are each said to be a Psalm of Ascents. Through the generations, people have debated the meaning of this phrase. James Mays, arguably among the world's greatest scholars of the Psalms, believes, "The most

likely and widely held theory about the superscription ‘ascents’ refers to the journeys made by the pilgrims to the three annual festivals observed in Jerusalem (Deut. 16:16).”

As pilgrims walked towards Jerusalem, they also walked upward, ascending the hill. As they walked, they recited certain poems and sang certain songs. Some of these are recorded and preserved for us as the Psalms of Ascent. This ascent to the Lord is important because of the importance of the destination. “Mount Zion is ‘the city of the great king’ because the LORD chose it as the place of his presence, the earthly counterpart to the heavenly throne and palace. . . . Its value to worshipers and pilgrims is evident. . . .” in several Psalms; this 127<sup>th</sup> Psalm among them.”

This particular Psalm did not appear until many years *after* the reign of King Solomon. And yet, the 127<sup>th</sup> Psalm is also said to be “of (or for) Solomon.” This statement is not one of historical fact. This is instead a statement of theological truth. “Certainly the attributions of Psalms to Solomon (Psalms 72; 127) and to Moses (Psalm 90) are based on the connections of these Psalms and the Scriptures about them.”

During his reign, Solomon had many successes. But, in the context of this Psalm of Ascent, Solomon must be remembered as the king who built the temple for the Lord God. Construction really began with Solomon’s father, David. It was David who first thought to build a temple for the Lord, our God. But, speaking through the prophet Nathan, David was forbidden from beginning construction. David instead provided the money, supplies, and the location for the Temple. But, it was Solomon, David’s son and successor king, who built the Temple.

This first temple stood from its completion (about 960 B.C.) until its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (586 B.C.). The Temple was eventually rebuilt and rededicated. This is the subject of the Old Testament book of Ezra, and the related stories of Nehemiah and Esther. This reconstruction would have occurred sometime between 536 and 515 B.C. From then on, the Second Temple, as it was known, would remain standing until its final destruction and disassembly by the Romans in A.D. 70.

The Temple was unique and important to the people of Israel. The reason for this building’s importance does not come from the facts that it was imagined by David or constructed by Solomon. The importance of the temple comes from its divine blessing.

“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”

### III.

The mysterious blessing of God, and our dependence upon it, is at the heart of the 127<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

The Psalmist makes this point by using two universal aspects of human life – work and family. “Work and family were the two constitutive dimensions of ordinary life in Israel. Life was set in the social unit of the family and supported by work. But both involved a mysterious uncertainty; work and family were human endeavors, but human action was not ultimately determinative in them. Work did not always come to fruition; marriage did not always produce children. The Psalm is grounded in fundamental trust in the providence of God as the decisive factor in all human life.”

To read this Psalm is to find three figurative cords braided together – our work, our home and our God. If we are unwilling to pursue the work of our hands, then there is no reward to be received from the work of our hands. If we are unwilling to build our metaphorical home, then there will be no blessing from our home. However, our labor and our love are not enough. If they are pursued apart from the direction provided by the LORD, our God, neither our labor nor our love will provide the reward that we seek.

There's an old saying about the balance between our need to work and our need for God's providential blessings. "Pray as though everything depends upon God. Work as though everything depends upon you."

Many attribute this old saying to the ancient writings of Augustine (A.D. 354-430). I can not tell you with any certainty as to who first spoke these words. However, we have all seen examples of lives lived with the certainty of this sentiment; that success depends both on our work and upon God's providential blessing.

On this Veterans Day weekend, it is appropriate that we remember a wartime example of this balance. During the Second World War, Germany enjoyed early success and many victories. The hopes for an Allied victory were placed in a secret plan, code named "Operation Overlord." After many months of planning and preparation, General Dwight Eisenhower gave the command to launch this high-risk assault on the beaches of Normandy. Along with the general order, Eisenhower sent a message to the troops. He said, in part:

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world. . . . I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory! Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

General Eisenhower's message is filled with the confidence necessary to initiate such a massive and costly attack. But, the outcome of the D-Day Invasion was not certain. Some time after the successful invasion, an aide to General Eisenhower found a note – an unused speech – in his shirt pocket. The General had written,

"Our landings have failed and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone."

The Psalmist wrote, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

We would do well to remember and to live by this statement. All too often we seek permanence in that which is passing; we seek to be remembered forever for that which is fleeting. We wish to bless God and yet we give considerably less than the best that we have to offer; and, at the same time, we fail to thank God for having received – and for continuing to receive – the best that the Almighty is able to give.

Our Veterans' Day celebration began as a remembrance of the Great War, the War to End All Wars. But, as we know, other wars followed. So we no longer celebrate only the peace that lasted a mere 21 years. We celebrate instead all who have ever worked to preserve that peace.

Throughout our history, many people have been willing and able to stand for our nation's defense. Some have served on land, others sea; still others in the air. Regardless of their branch of service, every veteran has experienced a moment when success depends on something other than preparation or equipment. Success also requires a providential blessing that can come only from God.

This same statement is true of every Believer in any age. Because we wish to do on our own that which simply is not possible without God, because we wish to control that which simply remains beyond our control, we become stressed. We end up losing sleep.

And so, my challenge for you is this: Let us commit ourselves anew to the Lord our God. Let us embrace the faith of the church. Let us declare an Armistice, an end to these hostilities that can consume our heart.

## END NOTES