

## UNDER CONSTRUCTION

This past week I overheard my wife Julia speaking with her father Fred. Fred was exhorting Julia to set aside some time for a trip that would take the two of them to a particular historical authority. Living on a farm his family has owned and operated since 1742, Fred has a document he thinks may be of interest to historians and which he hopes can be restored to better condition. Fred is quite proud of the house, the name, the legacy that he and other Sprenkles have been building for close to three centuries now. When you strive to build a house, to make a name for yourself, to secure a future for yourself and those you care about most, it's extremely gratifying when things come together in the way that you had hoped.

Today's reading from Ephesians is a case in point. With his opening words today, the writer of the letter addresses those who are all Gentile by birth. This is quite a positive development. Ever since his resurrection from the dead, Christ and his Church have been trying to build a house with enough rooms in it to accommodate not just those of Jewish origin, but also those of non-Jewish origin; those the letter writer calls "Gentiles." Quite clearly, this inclusive effort has met with some success. How gratifying! But of course, Christ's effort to make disciples of all nations is an ongoing effort. If it is to succeed, it will require our effort and cooperation as well. Will such effort and cooperation be forthcoming? The answer will likely have much to do with our approach to housebuilding. Will we buy into Christ's point of view on housebuilding; that a house can never enough people or rooms in it? Or will we buy into the world's competing take on housebuilding; that a house needs a fence around it; that a house has to limit the people for which it cares and the concerns to which it attends? To be sure, the pull to build houses and names and futures the world's way shall be strong.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus gets off a boat and is surrounded by people the evangelist compares to sheep without a shepherd. Here are people who have fallen through the cracks. Here are people who have been fenced out of the good life. Here are people for whom no room has been made. It's a prime example of how things go in our broken and sinful world. In contrast to God's inclusive housebuilding, we often take an exclusive approach to housebuilding. The thinking goes: Limit the number of rooms in your house. Keep the number of mouths you have to feed small. Take care of me and mine to the point where your cupboards and your freezers are overfilled. Put up the no trespassing signs. Dig a moat around your good fortune and keep the riff-raff on the other side of it.

This exclusive approach to housebuilding explains much of the language used in our reading from Ephesians. Using the word four times, the writer evidently feels peace might be a desirable commodity for the people to whom he writes. With peace in scarcity, it would seem a lot of people think the best way to build a house, the best way to secure a future, the best way to make a name for yourself is to beat down or wear down those who might get in the way of you and your plans. Don't invite these people into your house. Don't keep a meatloaf frozen for them. Don't keep a bed made for them. Beat them down. Wear them down. Show them who's boss. Break their back before they can be of any risk to you. Might this be why our reading from Ephesians pairs its talk of peace with a good deal of talk about strangers and aliens and hostilities and dividing walls? It sure seems likely. In direct opposition to God's desire to build a house and future that has room in it for all people, we all too often play King or Queen of the Mountain; scratching and clawing our way to the top where the objective becomes keeping as many as possible down below. It's an approach as old as Europe's many castles.

About seven years ago now my father-in-law Fred took his two children and me over to parts of Europe. The year after his beloved wife Joy had died, he wanted to show her children and his son-in-law where the two of them had gotten married in 1955 while Fred was finishing out a military commitment. At the time, my father-in-law's knees were already quite bad. It's what forty or more years of dairy farming will do to you. All the walking around on the concrete floors of a barn, all the up and down as you connect and disconnect milkers and as you get on and off machinery, will eventually catch up to you. But while over in Europe, Fred would hear nothing of taking it easy on his knees. With the castles and the shepherds who lived in them often high above all the commoners and everyday concerns down below, as well as all the foes who might come calling, Fred gutted it out.

You would think the pain he felt as he made the upward climb into castle after castle would have left him focused on himself and oblivious to the needs of those around him. But this isn't what happened. While traversing a particularly jagged incline into a place called Marksburg Castle, I'll never forget that Fred was looking out for others with physical limitations; helping them from jagged stone to jagged stone, pointing out this or that hazard, and often taking up the rear. A farmer all his life, Fred is a good shepherd. Good shepherds care for all the sheep. Every healthy ram or ewe, every lamb raised to maturity, increases the success of your operation; in the process building a house capable of tending not just to your

needs, but also to the needs of others. And what's true of livestock is also true of people. It's why Jesus takes care of all the neglected and forgotten people in today's reading from Mark. But again, the world will always be there to steer us away from this inclusive approach to housebuilding. It's why readings like today's reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel are there to encourage us to get back to the Church's job of building a house with enough rooms in it to accommodate all people.

In this reading, King David is living the high life. He doesn't seem to be bothered that his house of cedar seems to be several notches above the houses lived in by the flock he is to tend, but he is bothered that God is still living in a tent. Like we might ourselves, David wrongly assumes God is after the high life himself. Like we do when we go to a chiropractor, David needs an adjustment and he gets one through the prophet Nathan. God, Nathan says, isn't the least bit concerned about the acquisition of better digs. As will later become clear, give God a smelly manger and God will sleep in it; give God a cross and God will forgive from it; give God a tomb and God will lay in it for three days. God's concern isn't unduly personal. Like a good shepherd, God's concern is the flock. Perfectly satisfied with a tent, God's concern has been getting God's people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, where there will hopefully be plenty of milk and honey for them. For God, and hopefully for David and us too, this is how you build a house. This how you make a name for yourself. This is how you secure a legacy and a future. Once you've got some form of cover over your head and all the other basics that go along with it, you look away from yourself and towards the needs of others; in the process decreasing the number of your foes and increasing the number of your friends. Giving thanks for your good pleasure and those who already share in it, you constantly say to yourself, "Who isn't here yet? Who has still to make it?" And then, you go get whoever's missing and bring them back to the meatloaf that's been kept in the freezer for them and the bed that's been turned down for them.

Hopefully, this is where our hearts and our minds are set today. But there's also no guarantee that this is so. It's what happens when you're under construction like we all have been since the day of our baptism. The world pulls one way and God another. May God's blueprint for the Church and for each of us be followed more with each passing day through the ongoing ministrations of the Holy Spirit. We're not here for ourselves. We're here for others, both those already present and those yet to come. And when this happens by the grace of God, the irony is that we'll find ourselves living in a house built not on sinking

sand, but on a rock. Remember! We're as strong as our relationships, with more friends good and more foes bad. Amen!