

WHAT MAKES THE REJECTS SING? A Sermon on Psalm 118

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[Sermon preached at Seminex Baccalaureate, Commencement weekend, May, 1979.
See Thursday Theology #354 for more details.]

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord, Jesus the Christ.

The text for the sermon is from the psalm appointed for Easter Sunday, Psalm 118, the psalm which sets the tone for the whole of this paschal season. It is also the psalm which provides a basis of the new Seminex hymn, which we shall sing immediately after the sermon. The one verse from this psalm which I have chosen as our text, verse twenty-two, is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

I

This whole song, Psalm 118, is a song for rejects. It is not a song for builders. It is made to be sung only by "the stone whom the builders rejected." It is not made to be sung by the builders who reject the stone. The builders, just because they are builders--constructive, cautiously choosy, practical realists--have to discard that stone. For he, this strange stone, is bound to misfit their building and to undermine plans and programs and budgets. Yet he is the very stone whom the Lord, who builds so exasperatingly differently, turns right around and reinstates as the cornerstone--thus vetoing the builders. That is why the builders are not allowed to sing the Lord's song. In this whole song, in all twenty-nine verses, there is not one line which the builders get to sing. Not one line for them even to hum along or to whistle. The whole uproarious song from beginning to end is for the exclusive fun of those whom the lofty builders had mistakenly thought were the misfits, the undesirables, the expendables. Theirs is the final song. And those who excluded them, the very builders who had thought they were orchestrating the liturgy and assigning the parts and calling the tune, are themselves tuned out.

The builders--who are they? "They?" No, not "they." You! "YOU builders" is the way the apostle Peter quotes this song in the Book of Acts. "The Stone which was despised by YOU builders," says Peter, now turning the ancient song directly against the members of his own religious community, its leading members at that--the seminary-trained, certified, ordained builders of the ecclesiastical establishment (Acts 4:11), "You builders." Sure enough, we may say (still not getting the point), it was they all right, those same Jewish clergy whom Jesus himself had condemned for rejecting the stone. (Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10,11; Lk. 20:17) Right, it was they. But the point, friends, is that those "they"--as you and I conveniently refer to them--were, for Jesus, his face-to-face audience whom he addressed as "you" (Y-O-U), his own present company. And this morning in this church his present company is YOU, "you builders," you and I.

How offensive it must sound for me to level such a sharp criticism against us. That we are the churchly builders--that we can understand. After all, isn't that our special vocation? But to use our vocation as builders against us and to say that, precisely in the course of our duties as spiritual leaders, we are most prone to reject the Stone--that does seem insolent, not to mention ungrateful. I suppose that is how the priests and the scribes reacted, too, when they were criticized by Peter and Jesus. Even Martin Luther, who as you know was not easily shocked, did find it incredible that this psalm (his favorite) should make the accusation it does, namely, that the ones who reject the Stone are, of all people, the community's and the very church's own "builders"--those leaders, as Luther remarks, who "edify and improve and govern for the good of the people by preaching and teaching." Notice, Luther marvels, the psalm does not call them "destroyers, wreckers or bunglers," as we might expect. On the contrary, "they are the builders, the most necessary, the most useful and the best people on earth."

Finally, Luther does concede that, since there must be those who persecute the Gospel, it would have to be the builders who must do it. "Who else would do it?" he asks.

"No one else can. If there is to be persecution, they must do it; for they are the builders. They do it 'ex officio.' For they must see to it that their building has no crack, rent or disfiguration. Therefore they cannot tolerate the Word of God or those who declare it."

And why not? Why, because "such a person [who does declare the Word] disfigures their building. . . . He is [to them] a rabble-rouser who misleads their people. . . . His way of doing things is entirely different from theirs." When Luther himself had to direct this criticism against the builders of his own church --namely, that they too were rejecting the Stone--they responded in a way I would expect, and in a way I expect I would, too. "What do you mean," they replied, "do you think we are heathen or Jews?" So they had to reject this new rabble-rouser as well.

My fellow builders, I ask you, please, not to resent this brisk warning to us all. The building trade you and I are in, especially we church professionals, is a treacherously hazardous occupation, and deeply incriminating. You newcomers, the graduates, have every reason to approach this vocation with fear and trembling. For just look at the stones we builders reject--the stones we may even think we have to reject, 'ex officio'--in order to do the church's building. For instance, at the moment many of us may be most intent upon building our new ministerial careers or, if we are faculty, rebuilding old careers which suddenly seem threatened. In that anxious process of career building our own classmates may suddenly begin to look like competitors, or our faculty colleagues might, in view of the scarcity of job opportunities. We are tempted to distinguish among our associates between those stones who are still useful to us and those who no longer fit into our career plans--the unimportant stones, the expendables, those who might disfigure our building. But our leaving them behind, embarrassing as that may be for us, can still always be excused as inevitable or even as positively constructive so long as we can rationalize (as we do) that these careers we are building are not only for ourselves but (and here is the magic word) for "the ministry." It does seem to stand to reason then that

whatever stones happen to get in the way of such a noble cause will of course have to be eased aside or stepped over--all for the good of our ministries.

The expendable stones become still more expendable when what we are building is not merely personal ministries but some structure more objective, more institutional than that, like whole congregations or whole seminaries or whole new church bodies. Then the top priority must go toward building what we call a support system. For those stones who do not support the system or, worse yet, who criticize it, there simply can be no room in the system. Too bad, but they will have to fall by the way--even old friends and fellow-Christians. However, nowhere in the whole church is there a building project which so righteously sorts out the bad stones as does that project which we call "taking a stand," "making a confessional witness." That method of ridding ourselves of bad stones can be made to seem not only justified but downright heroic. That sort of weeding out we may even be able to pull off with a good conscience. In fact, we may swear that if we had it all to do over again, we would still have to do it the same way, let the stones fall where they may. And we would probably be right. And they would still be wrong.

So what? So what if those stones are wrong, and we builders are dead right in displacing them? So what does that prove about us, for all our rightness? Do we imagine for one moment that that entitles us builders to sing this song to the Lord, a song he reserves exclusively for rejects? Have we forgotten that those same stones whom we discard, no matter how justifiedly, are themselves free at any moment to appeal beyond our rejection of them and to cry to the Lord for pity? Doesn't he, regardless of their wrong and of our right, have a special ear for pleas like theirs? Doesn't he come to their rescue and take their side? And when he does, my fine builders, where do you suppose that puts you and me? Right, that puts us on the wrong side--us, the dead right ones, now on the wrong side--working against considerably unfavorable odds, considering who the rejects' new ally is. That is hardly conducive to our singing.

Then where does it get us to protest that, after all, we are only doing our duty as builders, true as that may be? Still, what kind of duty could that possibly be when God himself has to override and reverse it in order to recover those casualties whom we in our duty leave behind? What good can it possibly do us then to prove that those stones whom we discard--those what's-their-names, many of whom we may even have forgotten--really are misfit or really are wrong or really superfluous, all of which they just might be? For what if, besides being misfit, they have in the meantime also been put to shame and to inconvenience and to hardship and forgottenness and, out of that sorry experience, have learned no longer to stake their lives upon us builders but now instead upon the Lord? What then? well, you can read the psalm as well as I. Where does it ever say that the reason the Lord takes their side is that they are innocent or that they are sufficiently sorry or that they deserve a second chance? No, what the psalm does say, unmistakably, is that the Lord takes their side because builders like you and me do not, and because they, our rejects, now turn to him as their only recourse. Which suddenly puts you and me up against rather sizable opposition.

Can you imagine, in face of the rejects' new and prestigious coalition, that their rejectors, the dead right builders, would still be presumptuous enough to horn in on the singing? And if the uninvited builders would persist in singing the song anyway or, worse yet, would try to direct the song, can you imagine how their unwanted singing would come across at the other end? Paul [Manz, organist], could you please demonstrate how under those circumstances the builders' singing must sound? (Silence) Exactly.

II

Well, then, if what gives us a voice in the Lord's song is not that we are builders, if on the contrary our building activities may actually prejudice our being heard at all, then what part in the singing is left to us? Would you believe: the STONES' part, the part of the rejects? That one qualification--that dubious, unflattering qualification--we do happen to have, as the stones whom other builders reject. At least most of us here this morning do. At the same time that we at Seminex have been trying to promote our own building project within the church, we ourselves are also being discarded at the hands of still other churchly builders. In fact, we often build as aggressively as we do because in large part there are those other builders who evidently have no room for us stones in their building. There would be no need of Seminex, you graduates would not need to scramble for calls the way you do, nor we for students or funding, nor the AELC for congregations, nor Missouri moderates for direction, and this morning's service would all be quite different, were it not for the fact--the still very present fact--of our exclusion. We, especially you graduates, do know something about being expendable.

Let me quickly explain, however, that that fact of our ecclesiastical rejectedness is just that, a fact. It is not a reason for us to pity ourselves, nor is it something to be cocky about. Nevertheless, as the psalm assures us, our exclusion does provide us with an exceptional opportunity, the opportunity to appeal for ultimate Help. Our very exclusion by others drives home how desperately we need to look beyond the builders, any builders, for our help and to look only to that one wild Builder beyond them all who has a special eye for discards and who alone can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Being at the bottom of the heap is not the worst place to be. True, as we said, it also is no virtue. Nor is it, by itself, a tragedy. But being down, there is after all only one direction left in which to look, only One to whom to raise our voices.

"Out of our distress [we] called on the Lord; he answered [us] and set [us] free." (v.5)

That angle of sound does something for the quality of the singing. If you don't know what it is like to sing from way down here--especially, together--then you also don't know the fun of being listened to and applauded from way up there. Forget about the martyrdom, also the false heroics. Who needs it? I mean, who needs THAT when what we really need is infinitely more than that? What we need is nothing less than a divine rescue. But being for once in a position to acknowledge that, being able at last to cry for really big help, and to cry for it from the One who majors in giving it--that does have its own kind of exhilaration. An old German proverb says "hunger is the best cook." Also, we might add, it does wonders for one's singing.

Ultimately, there is really only one reason that being down is an advantage. (Not down and out, just down.) Only one thing can make being down worthwhile. Without that one thing, "the one thing needful," we degenerate into masochism or what is just as silly, whistling in the dark. It is only because down here, at the bottom, we are in the best of company that therefore we can make the most of it. It is only because down here is where HE companies with us, the original Reject with the other misfits, that we can find one Cornerstone to lean upon who won't ever give way. Down here is where HE comes, not the god with the builder mentality, merely a god-of-the-good and the right, but the God rather who finally descends beneath all such nosy questions about rightness and wrongness and simply stoops to our condition so as to raise us back to his. The only thing good about being down is that that is where the sepulchre is, his sepulchre, which opens up to Easter and the life which lasts--and does so every day over.

"[We] shall not die but live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. The Lord has chastened [us] sorely, but he has not given [us] over to death." (vv.17-18)

In any other connection, except in connection with him, that would sound maudlin or like phony theatrics. WITH him, being down is just the flip-side of being Eastered and exalted to the Lord's right hand.

There will still be times galore when you will find it hard to accept being lowly stones rather than lofty builders, and you simply won't believe that such a low estate can be so close to resurrection. On the other hand, there are already many of you, I notice, who hardly seem to need any other footing beneath you, any other support system, than that Cornerstone who himself came from the bottom of the heap. Apparently because of him, his everlasting arms, you no longer need to do your tightrope acts over a net. You are not as beset as some of us builders still are with "the wing-walker's syndrome": not letting go of one strut until you've got hold of the next. You don't seem to panic, builder-like, when there's no special niche reserved for you within the organization's buildings. I am thinking of you faculty and staff persons--three in particular--who are volunteering to step out of your accustomed jobs. I am thinking of you beautiful retirees who have been traveling light for all the rest of us. I am thinking of our new breed of church leaders, those synod bishops and Seminex administrators who even when they have to be builders remember all the more to be stones. I am thinking especially of you Seminex graduates and of the graduating classes before you who go out from here but without any very visible support--except for him who dies for us and rose again. The rest of us are watching you and taking note, for when our own turn comes. I seem to recall your password, "He is risen indeed."

There are rumors afoot that Seminex is scheduled to die soon, rumors born more of wish than of fact. There are other rumors, which are probably more factual, that Seminex is committed to survive indefinitely. Both rumors, however, commit the same fallacy. They both assume that in order for us to keep the song going, in order for us (as the psalm says) to "recount the deeds of the Lord," we simply have to have the support and

approval of the builders. Both sorts of rumor commit the same unbelief, namely, that in order for us to "not die but live" we have to build as the builders build. The truth is, however--the whole secret of the song is--in ultimately not NEEDING the builders' kind of building, not a seminary, not career-building, not even a denomination, but needing only him who can build with the oddest shaped materials the most extraordinary church you ever did see. That opportunity I believe we shall continue to enjoy. In the process we may even rouse a little rabble.

Now, as for the song, let's hear it from you misfits. Mark [Bangert, choirmaster], Paul [Manz], trumpets and all--take it away.