



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FINISHING THE WORK”

Scripture Lessons: I Chronicles 28:9 - 29:9

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, February 8, 2009.

We were called to worship this morning by a very ancient liturgical formula used by Christians since the third century. It is called the Sursum Corda, which in Latin literally means, “lift up your hearts.” Usually the Sursum Corda is a preface to prayer, especially the Eucharistic Prayer in the communion service. However, I chose it as a call to worship on this Presentation Sunday for our Generations Campaign because it seems to relate to our passage of scripture chosen for today. In our scripture today King David offers to his son Solomon and to all of his subjects as they undertake the building of the Lord’s house a challenge that is as appropriate today as it was 3,000 years ago. The question King David asked his people and his son is the question I ask us this morning, “Will we with “single minds and willing hearts” undertake the task of building a house for God’s service?” In addition, will we finish the work given to us?

You may recall that David, the Shepherd King, was called “the man after God’s own heart” but at this point in sacred history he has come to the end of his days. As if by some miracle of God he rises from what was believed to be his death bed to give a stirring charge to his son who is succeeding him upon the throne and who has been anointed not only as King of Israel but as the builder of God’s temple in Jerusalem. So it is that David gives a memorable address to all the people as they undertake the temple’s construction with their gifts and talents.

It is a scene of serene beauty, of fatherly affection and ceremonial splendor, of joyful and faithful stewardship. But the father that is about to address his son and his subjects had surely known his own times of darkness and despair. Ominous clouds had gathered around David from the time of his great sin with Bathsheba. War, famine and pestilence had diminished the numbers and laid waste the homes of his realm. Rebellions in his own family and the death of son after son had tormented his soul. No doubt, there were some in Israel who may have legitimately questioned the wisdom of such an undertaking at that time in the realm. They were not unlike those who wonder in our day if this is the time to complete the work that we have undertaken. And yet, through all of the sorrows and trials the penitent king had undergone he found comfort in the everlasting covenant that God has established with him. (Ex. 34:10) And so, while David’s own sin would prevent him from building the Lord’s temple, he was granted a vision of what that temple should be and he was assured that his decedents and his son would complete the task. It was a worthy goal and a high destiny, this building of God’s temple. And friends, it is a work shared by God’s people even as it is today as the church is always about the task of building God’s house and expanding the work of God’s kingdom. Each generation rests on the labors of those who have gone before them, not just the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the head cornerstone, but those faithful stalwarts who have given us the facilities and the heritage that have so blessed us. To be sure we understand that God’s dwelling place is not a physical structure but rather a spiritual temple composed of his people. Our God resides not in a place but in those women and men, boys and girls who have committed themselves to him and comprised the church universal.

In this congregation you and I stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. I decided to include in our morning bulletin some excerpts from a presentation brochure from more than 50 years ago when the generation before many of us come a few of whom still survive, who undertook the task of building our present Molly Wier Hall, offices and annex. They were faithful in their time and we can only hope and pray that we will be faithful in ours. Every generation of God's people is given its own challenges and opportunities. Every generation must decide if it is up to the sacrifices the times demand.

If you listen carefully to David's farewell address to Solomon and the people of Israel, you will hear a message as relevant today as it was then. You will also discover the two things necessary for anyone who would share in the building of God's house. As the people prepare to bring their gifts and offerings and talents for the temple's construction, David specified the two traits essential for this high and holy service, the two characteristics that should mark their stewardship. David tells Solomon, "Serve him with a whole heart and a willing mind." And after the people had dedicated their gifts for the temple's construction we read, "Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord." Without question the people of God had "lifted up their hearts and minds" in service and in stewardship to their God. And what I would have you understand today as we begin to consider what we will do in the building of God's house is that no less is needed from his servants who will share in the continuing work of his kingdom. We are to offer ourselves and our gifts willingly and whole-heartedly.

The question David asked the people is the one that comes down through the centuries to us and it is found in I Chronicles 29:5b: "Who then will offer willingly, consecrating themselves today to the Lord?" Your packet today will contain pledge cards but we do not want you to fill them out yet. We want you to leave here and consecrate yourself to the Lord and his work. We want you to think and pray about what you can do as an individual or a family. Study the contents of your packet. We want you to consider what will be a sacrifice, a gift that with God's gift help you can accomplish over three years (more if you need it).

How the Lord loves gifts that are offered freely and cheerfully and sacrificially. We all love gifts like this. As a parent I can assure you of something you already know. The best gifts I ever received from my children were not the ones that arrived on Father's Day or Christmas or Birthdays, when cultural pressures and traditions may prompt such giving. No the best gifts were the unexpected love notes, the hand drawn pictures, the crude bouquet of wild flowers which were offered free, voluntarily and occasionally with special effort. Every father, even our Heavenly Father, desires gifts such as this.

But not only are we to give willingly, but also whole-heartedly. In Hebrew thought and in biblical psychology, the heart is the central and unifying organ of the personality. It was viewed to be the innermost spring of individual life, the source of one's physical, intellectual, emotional and volitional energies. The heart of a person was where contact with the Divine was normally achieved. In the recesses of the heart dwelt the thoughts, plans, attitudes, fears and hopes which determine an individual's character. You might say that the heart was the deepest depth of an individual's being, the seat of both the emotions and the intellect.

Therefore to love God with one's full heart is to love from the depth of one's being. To give with one's full heart, is to give as an expression of one's deepest longings and most profound desires. So then, when David charges Solomon to serve God with "A whole heart and a willing mind" he is telling him that his service should not only be voluntary and free, but the expression of and the fulfillment of his deepest desires.

We are striving for 100% participation in this campaign but we want your gifts to be whole-hearted and willing. We want you to want to give, not till it hurts but till it feels good. We want your gift to express your love for the Lord and your commitment to the work of his kingdom.

In the coming weeks we are challenging you as David challenged his son and his subjects to finish the work that God had given them to do. We pray that your giving and your pledging will be whole-hearted and willing.

Anything entered upon willingly and gladly is worthy of celebration, don't you think? Whether we are talking about a professional calling, an avocation, a marriage, a family, or even a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the work of his church. David, Solomon and the people of Israel entered upon the building of the temple willingly and whole-heartedly and consequently their gifts were abundant and became a great celebration.

In the construction of God's temple it was first the leaders who made their commitments and then the people were sent out to consecrate themselves and to consider what they would do. We are asking those who are the leaders of our church and those who have expressed an interest in being a pacesetter to make their commitments on March 8th and we are hoping that the balance of the congregation will make their commitments on Consecration Sunday, March 15. And then on the 29th of March we plan to have a celebration of God's goodness and of the commitments of our people as we have a big Sunday dinner together after church and announce the results of our Generations Building Campaign.

I am convinced that if we lift up our hearts to the Lord, if we commit ourselves to give willingly and whole-heartedly, if we attempt a great thing for God we will experience great blessings from God and in the end we will marvel not at what we have accomplish but at what the Lord was able to accomplish through our ordinarily people like you and me.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.