

1

When my children were young, I had a workshop in the basement, a room shared with the laundry and furnace and storage. I often went there to build things out of wood, such as a play sink and stove and refrigerator for my daughter, complete with running water and plastic food. My son often liked to join me in these adventures, and we would spend hours building all sorts of things, from pinewood derby cars for boy scouts to boats that would float in the water. I taught him the basics of using a hammer and saw and other tools, and when my daughter was old enough, she joined us in these creative adventures, though she often added lots of paint and glitter to whatever project we were building. When she decided she wanted a dollhouse, she picked the design of the house that included a tower, along with the color of paint for the outside of the house and the color of wallpaper. The house had wooden shingles and electric lights, and of course, tiny furniture and tiny people.

By giving my children practice with the basic tools of the workshop, I hoped the skills would

prepare them for other creative adventures and for building up their lives. My son now helps build gravitational wave detectors, and although my daughter would still prefer that I repair things that fall apart, she will soon leave for China to use her teaching skills to build friendships with young children on the other side of the world.

Isn't that what life is all about? Building up the world around us using whatever skills and gifts God has given us. Taking the tools we learned to use in childhood to bring hope to those around us.

Last week when we read the letter to the Ephesians it sounded just the opposite, for rather than *building* walls, the writer encouraged us to *break* walls of injustice, following God's actions. The writer suggested: "Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us" (2:14).

When we run into walls of hatred, God invites us to break them down. But breaking down walls is not enough—we need to be able to build something in

2

the place of those broken walls. A place of peace and welcome. In order to do so, we need the right tools, skills formed not in the workshop in my basement, but in the workshop of our church. Some of you may think of that dingy room in our church basement beside the stage in fellowship hall, for it's a workshop filled with tools, and quite often when something falls apart in the church, Larry or Jeff or Jack will head down there to get a tool to make repairs.

If you look closely in that room, you might spot some leftover drops of paint on the floor or on a table from many years of the Wednesday WOW afterschool craft making. That basement workshop was a sacred place of building skills and creativity, but more importantly, of building relationships with children in our community who discovered a sense of hope in that place. When I first walked into that room, I could hear the faint sounds of children's voices, hammers pounding, and paint brushes swishing paint—all echoes of children who

experienced a place of welcome, a place where hope was built in their lives.

WOW did more than break down walls, it built friendships and meaning, and that's what the letter to Ephesians suggested the church is all about.

The author of this letter does an interesting thing by quoting a portion of Psalm 68, which is a song that celebrates God's care for the poor and oppressed and how God saves the people. In the particular verse that the writer to the Ephesians quotes from this song, the psalm speaks of God ascending a mountain and *receiving* gifts from the people. But in the letter to the Ephesians, the writer modifies the verse to say that God *gave* gifts to the people rather than *receiving* them.

Why this change in actions? It could be that the author of the letter got mixed up and misquoted the psalm. Has that ever happened to you? You begin by saying, "It says in the Bible..." but then your mind goes blank and you can't remember the exact phrase. Maybe that happened with this writer as he tried to quote from the book of the Psalms.

Or maybe the author was trying to make a point by slightly changing the words. Whereas the psalm celebrated what people gave God, this letter to the church in Ephesus wanted to emphasize the gifts *God had given them*, for the letter continues: God inspired some to be apostles and evangelists—to take the good news of Jesus out into the world. Some had the gift of being a prophet—those who remind us how to treat one another fairly. Some had the gift of being pastors and teachers to help build up the church.

Each one of you has been given a gift, a skill or talent or passion that can help build up the body of Christ that we call the church. Maybe it's singing or teaching or serving. Maybe it's smiling or sending cards or hugging. Maybe it's cleaning or weeding or cooking. Maybe it's painting or dreaming or hoping. Maybe it's financing or quilting or loving.

You might have noticed the post-it note in your bulletin. On that paper, list the gifts that God has given you to build up the church...And then come and post them up front.

You might be thinking: *How can one tiny gift make a difference? I'm just one person.*

Have you ever felt like you're all alone, that you can't make a difference in the world? Sometimes we get so caught up with the storms in our own lives that we feel as though we're an ant drifting alone in the water after a rainstorm.

Instead, think of yourself as a fire ant in South America. Suddenly it begins to rain, which is very common in that part of the world, and the flood waters begin to pour into your ant colony. What do you do?

You could try and save yourself and swim off to safety alone, but since you somehow know that you cannot survive as a single ant in a pool of water. There has to be a better solution than swimming off by yourself to drown.

How about letting other ants grab onto you, possibly pushing you under the water? How does that sound as a solution? ... Well, that's exactly the plan that will save you—along with everyone else.

④

Scientists have observed that a single fire ant dropped into water will not survive, but a teaspoon full of ants dropped into water will join together to form an interlocking life raft. Even those ants who find themselves at the bottom of the heap and under water will still survive since the ants somehow create pockets of air in the raft for those underneath to breathe. In nature, thousands of fire ants can join together in flooded conditions to form these rafts that can sometimes float for many months at a time until they drift to safety.¹ In the lab, even when the ant raft is pushed on from above, the ants bond together so tightly that they cannot be pushed under the water.²

That's what the letter to the Ephesians suggests—that we build an ant raft, which we call

the church. We build a place where we interlock our arms and hands and float together in the floods of life. When one of us experiences the flood of feelings at the loss of a loved one, we link together. When one of us faces the tragic news of illness, we link together. When one of us experiences financial struggles, we link together. The church is like an ant raft, built up through the stories of God's people, tools that we pass on in the workshop of the church by telling the stories to our children and one another. Look at all the gifts we have named (on the post-it notes). Use your gift, your tool, your skill in building up this ant raft we call the church.

¹ Catherine Meyers, "Fire Ants Surf Floods on Rafts of Their Own Bodies," April 25, 2011, <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2011/04/fire-ants-surf-floods-rafts-their-own-bodies>

² See video at www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/26/fire-ant-raft-video_n_853872.html