

**God's Sustainable Architecture:
Building with Recycled Materials
Acts 9:1-9
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Third Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley**

After last Sunday's sermon, I was not planning on addressing the subject of raccoons and their babies again in a sermon. That's kind of one time thing. But so many of you have asked me to provide an update on our situation that I guess I need to do that.

As you now know, a raccoon has taken up residence in our attic, given birth with the aid of Raccoon Lamaze, which we heard, and, as I described last week, made a heroic re-entrance into our attic to get back to her babies. Her determination and strength and dexterity, the power of a mother's love, all of these things are very inspiring. All of which makes feel a little bad that now I just want her dead.

Apparently, though, she is also a little bit clumsy. First last Saturday night and then Sunday, Rusty (the Critter man) and I think that she accidentally knocked her two remaining babies down into the wall. We heard her scratching ferociously at the top of the wall trying to get to them.

After awhile she seemed to give up, and things calmed down. But now we were left with the constant screeching of two two week old raccoon babies in our walls. These things screeched constantly all day Sunday, all night, and all day Monday.

Apparently raccoon babies don't have to breathe. They just screech.

Of course, through it all, I maintained contact with Rusty. Finally Rusty got out to the house Monday afternoon. Using his \$10,000 heat sensitive camera (which the Beasley family has now almost personally paid for) he located the two babies in the wall.

Rusty cut a hole in the wall and pulled out one of the baby raccoons. Very cute, by the way. However, surprise, surprise, the other baby raccoon had fallen down on the other side of the wall stud. So he had to cut another hole in the wall to get that one out.

Rusty took the screeching little bandits away, and we had peace. Sure, we had two holes in the dining room wall and torn up shingles on the roof and a torn up vent cover under one of the eaves of the house, and bills, the total of which could put these baby raccoons through college at a public university or maybe a junior college. But we did finally have peace.

Thursday morning. Three days ago. We heard a familiar and dispiriting sound. It couldn't be true, but it was: above our kitchen, about six feet away from the raccoon birthing area and nursery, we heard the chattering of another baby raccoon and the movements of her mother.

And so, another call to our friend Rusty. It was good to renew our relationship.

I could go on and on. I think you get the point. This dadgum raccoon cannot be caught or stopped. Every time we think

we've got her trapped, blocked, done away with, removed, or exterminated, she reappears.

I figure how we feel must be somewhat similar to the frustration of those who sought to exterminate, to do away with, Jesus. Every time they thought they had him—even when they had him in a tomb with a huge stone rolled in front of the entrance—the entrance became an exit and he pops up again somewhere else.

And then another place. Just when you think you have Jesus nailed down... there he goes again. So there are all these resurrection appearances that Jesus makes. He pops up here, and he shows up there.

One of those resurrection appearances Jesus makes (and one that we sometimes don't think about as a resurrection appearance) is to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Ironically, Jesus pops up again on this road appearing to a man who was in fact doing his best to exterminate, put an end to, do away with, the memory of Jesus among those who were believing in his continued presence.

Isn't it interesting—at least I think it's interesting—that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul, of all people?

I was reading this week in *Homiletics* journal [April 22, 2007] about prefabricated concrete slabs. These were the preferred building materials in East Germany, beginning in the 1960s. This communist country faced a severe housing shortage, so concrete slabs were used to build shoe-box-shaped residential apartments in a quick and economical way.

The advantage of these slabs was that they could be used as the building blocks of a variety of structures, from high-rise towers to rows of low-rise apartments. The buildings were called “plattenbau”—literally, slab-building. After East Germany and West Germany reunited, the demand for these ugly apartment buildings began to drop, and they say that now there are now about a million unoccupied units. Many of these plattenbau apartments are being torn down, and others are falling apart.

Enter two young architects, the Biele brothers. According to *Fast Company* (September 2006), these two are looking at the plattenbau apartments and seeing more than just the dwindling remains of communist culture. They see raw materials. These brothers are taking the concrete blocks from demolished apartments and recycling them into single-family homes. They get the slabs for nothing more than the cost of hauling them away, and then their workers bolt the plates together, cut out windows, and put a finish on the exterior. These recycled slabs allow for construction savings of up to 40 percent. The result is a new house with an attractive look.

I think what I am reading about this innovative recycling effort helps us to get a fresh look at the familiar story of Paul's conversion.

Paul is as solid and strong as a concrete slab when he takes a stand against the Christians of Damascus — he has solid credentials. He is *a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless* (Philippians 3:5-6). Paul stands tall against members of “the Way” — the group of Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. He

hits the road for Damascus, *breathing threats and murder* against these brand-new Christians, and pledges to capture them, tie them up, and cart them back to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 9:1-2).

Why was Paul doing this? Why was he persecuting these people so zealously?

Some scholars have concluded that Paul persecuted Christianity (which was then called “the Way”) not on account of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah—there were all kinds of would-be messiahs, believing in one or the other did not necessarily target you for persecution by the religious establishment—but rather on account of the fact that this new sect, this “Way” was admitting Gentiles—non-Jews—into its number without requiring that they be circumcised or follow the Law.

[E.P. Sanders, *Paul, The Law, and the Jewish People* (1983), at 191.]

You have to step back and think about this for a second to remember why this would be so offensive. The Jewish people are a covenanted people—bound in a covenant to God to be a people apart, not to engage in the idolatries of the nations, not to act as other nations do.

The many requirements of the law, such as the strict food laws, serve no other purpose than to identify who is a Jew and who isn't. They are designed to keep the Jewish people God's people set apart.

So it's one thing if you and your fellow Jews want to meet on the first day of the week and talk and pray about your

Resurrected Messiah. It's quite another thing if you're inviting Gentiles in to this group—not requiring them to become Jews—and calling them members of “Israel”.

To a traditional Jew, this would destroy Jewish identity. It would erase the difference between Jew and Gentile. Imagine how you might feel....

So, here we have Paul of Tarsus, a devout Jew, a righteous man defending his faith from a group he believes is acting in a way that is dangerous to the identity of his people and could endanger the social fabric.

So he hits the road to Damascus, breathing threats and murder against these violators of his faith. All of a sudden, right in the middle of the day, there was a light so bright it made the sun look like a dim bulb.

Out of the light came a voice that called him by his Hebrew name, *Saul, Saul. Why are you persecuting me?*

Paul was able to say, *Who are you?*

And the reply, *I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.*

At this point, you might expect Paul to be pulverized. After all, he is a zealous persecutor of the church, one who has endorsed the killing of Stephen and engaged in *ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, [committing] them to prison* (8:1-3). You wouldn't blame Jesus for taking the opportunity to send Paul to the scrap heap. But instead, he recycles him and puts him to a new use.

Jesus said to Paul, *Those Christians in Damascus, don't fight them. Join them. I want you on my side.*

And Paul never in his life forgot that moment. He was transformed. He made it to Damascus and was baptized on the spot. He was never the same again, and neither was the world.

Jesus has big plans for this persecutor of the church. He tears Paul down, but he doesn't tear him up — instead, he recycles him into an apostle. God always practices what they call sustainable architecture—God builds with recycled materials.

The good news of this story is that nothing is wasted by God. Every strength, talent, insight and experience we have — whether secular or sacred, rough or smooth, bad or good — can be a building block for God to use.

God doesn't destroy the raw materials of the lives we have lived, but instead he recycles them and refashions them into something new.

We shouldn't just hate ourselves for being a building block in a communist apartment building or an active persecutor of the church; shouldn't beat ourselves up over selfish choices and destructive decisions. Jesus doesn't want our regrets. He wants our raw materials.

Every one here has talents, insights and experiences that can be recycled by God for ministry and mission.

As I thought about the Virginia Tech tragedy this week, I began to think about what the response will be, and I remembered another tragic school shooting. The Amish of

Lancaster County had the excruciating experience of watching five of their children die in October of gunshots in a one-room schoolhouse, and they took that agonizing event, and they used it to be a remarkable witness for forgiveness and non-violence.

Instead of seeking revenge, dozens of Amish neighbors mourned the death of the milkman who killed their young girls. About half of the 75 mourners at the burial of gunman Charles Carl Roberts IV were Amish. *It's the love, the forgiveness, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family*, said Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain, to *USA Today* (October 7, 2006). *I broke down and cried seeing it displayed.*

God can take all the raw materials of life — even the most painful and inexplicable events — and recycle them in ways that can become something altogether different. Like buildings being torn down and rebuilt, we find ourselves being transformed in ways that enlarge and improve our capacity to be who God has called us to be.

It's just the sort of thing that a God who would raise Jesus from the dead might do. I mean, really, if you're going to say you believe in Easter, if you're going to say you believe in Jesus' resurrection, I think you've got to believe that God can take people off the scrap heap and recycle them in marvelous ways.

If you're going to say you believe in Easter, you've got to believe that God can change Pharisees to apostles, worn out apartment buildings to single family homes, self-centered people to God-centered instruments of ministry, from the scrap heap to building blocks.

All of that, from Paul on the Damascus road all the way down to you and me, all of those are demonstrations of the power of Easter faith. William Willimon is now a Methodist bishop in Birmingham, but prior to that he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He tells about a student he met who was in his sophomore year, when he arrived at Duke as a transfer student.

[Duke Chapel, April 29, 2001]

This student was in the Chapel on most Sundays. One day in the fall, Willimon took him home with him for a sandwich. As they sat there eating, the student said, *I want to tell you something about me so you can know me a little better.*

OK. Well, first I was a teenager from hell. I made my folks' lives miserable, he said. Willimon said that was a not too original story around there. The young man went on, *They had me committed to a mental institution when I was sixteen. But I escaped from there, made my way to Chicago, worked as a prostitute on the streets. Got into lots of stuff. One night I rolled this guy, took his wallet and used his American Express card to buy some stuff.* Wow, Willimon said. *I thought you meant that you got a speeding ticket in high school. I told you I was bad,* he said. *Anyway, cops got me. I was sent to Joliet prison. That was like entering the depths of hell. This older prisoner took me under his wing to protect me. Every night, before lock down, he would read a chapter out of the Bible to me, out of the gospel of Luke. He wasn't too good a reader, so it would take him forever, stumbling over the words and stuff.*

Well, one night he was reading Luke, about the middle, the stories about the lost sheep, and the prodigal son, and all, and it was like this hand just reached in that cell, grabbed me by

the throat, shook me up and down and said, "I've got plans for you!"

Well, I got saved. I got out of that prison in a few months, finished my high school degree, and I'm here on a full scholarship. Wow, Willimon said. *We don't hear stories like that around here too often.* Well, the student continued, *the reason I'm telling you this is that you're a preacher, right? And I know you guys are always grubbing around for stories, illustrations and stuff. And you got Easter coming up in a few weeks.*

Well, I am your proof of Easter.

God brings life! The reworking can sometimes be painful. The reshaping can sometimes be difficult to endure. But with God, nothing is trashed; it is transformed.