

The Second Sunday in Lent • March 8, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Romans 4:13-25

“Worthy”

A lot of you have probably played with Lego blocks either on your own or with your children or grandchildren. These little plastic bricks can stack into pretty much anything you can imagine – and have enough Lego pieces to build. If you visit a toy store, including Lego's own shops, you could purchase building kits for cars, alien rockets, pirate islands, and even a to-scale model of the Eiffel Tower. Lego kits come with directions, thankfully. These guides show you which type of piece goes where, walking you through the process with clearly drawn illustrations – you just stack one brick or piece on top of another to lock them together, assembling sections of the final product. Before long, if you follow the directions precisely, your pile of plastic bits could look like the spaceship pictured on the front of the box.

I used to be pretty good with Legos growing up. My brother and I had bins full of bricks that we used to build buildings and cities, with little Lego people who'd drive around or fly through space. But Legos aren't just for little kids any more. There's an entire line of Lego toys that feature highly-articulated build-it-yourself action figures with their own mythology and backstory. There are even more advanced kits that allow you to build programmable, computer controlled robots. And hobbyists have built some pretty amazing things out of Lego blocks on their own, like detailed replicas of the Taj Mahal and the Statue of Liberty. I used to be pretty good with Legos, but these folks are astounding. But whether you're going use your Legos to build a tiny truck or a Statue of Liberty, you need a plan, instructions to indicate which brick would go where and at which point it'd be used. If you skip a step or use the wrong piece, you'll eventually discover that you can't finish. You'll have to take your project apart until you get back to the point you'd made the error, then start rebuilding from there. If things are really bad – if you realize that there've been several missteps and mistakes – you might have to just take the whole thing apart and start from scratch.

St. Paul didn't have Legos back when he wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome, but those little plastic bricks might help us to better understand his message. Imagine that your entire life is a big Lego project, and you're supposed to build a to-scale model of the Statue of Liberty. You've got piles upon piles of Lego bricks at your disposal, including those fancy hinged pieces that bend and spin. But you're not alone. Everyone else you know has the same assignment. Fortunately, you've all been given detailed instructions, complete with those handy illustrations. There's just one catch: once you start building, you can't go back and disassemble what you've been building. If you skip a step, or put the wrong brick in the wrong place, you'll just have to build around it. As you work, you can see what kind of progress the people you know have made with their own Statue of Liberty. Some of these folks are pretty slow, trying to figure out which piece goes where. Others seem to be pretty proficient, following the directions and linking block after block in an orderly fashion – click, click, click, click. Then there are some individuals who, it would seem, have thrown the instructions away. They're putting their Legos together according to their own plan, even though it looks like their project could come toppling over at any time. Time goes by, and you think your model doesn't look too bad – especially when compared to what some of the people around you have been building. Then, all of a sudden, you run out of bricks. Time's up. And the judging begins. You're confident that you've done the best that you could with what you'd been given. Sure, there are some imperfections here and there – and it'd be best if nobody looks too closely at the model (front or back) – but overall, you know it's better than what your neighbors have produced. A few of the people that you know produced some pretty impressive work, and you can tell that they put a lot of

effort and care into the project. But then the official rolls out the gold standard – the Statue of Liberty model that will be used to judge all the others. You look on it in awe. The level of detail is extraordinary. Every aspect of the craftsmanship is sublime. The builder chose all the right bricks, put them in just the right places. Beholding this perfection, even the best of the models you’ve seen looks more like Picasso’s interpretation of the Statue of Liberty: twisted, deformed, and blocky in comparison. You realize that your model doesn’t stand a chance.

Let’s go back to Paul’s letter to the Romans. In our Lego-world, the law that Paul’s writing about would be our instruction sheet. We’ve got it: God has written the Law on our hearts; however, we don’t always do so well in following it. We don’t build the perfect life. Abraham didn’t, either. And yet, we think that we’re special. We want to be exceptional, above the rest of the crowd. It’s not that we have anything against the people around us – even if they don’t make as much money as we do, or they aren’t as intelligent or as good-looking as we are, or they didn’t go to seminary for their theological education – it’s just that we’re, well, better. It’s not that we’re self-important or arrogant – that’s just how it is... right? Wrong. Before God, all of us have Picasso-looking lives. Only Jesus, the son of a carpenter, built a life that followed the instruction sheet perfectly, and his life wasn’t topped with a crown like you find on the Statue of Liberty, but with a crown of thorns. His life, and no other, fulfilled the Law.

Rather than looking to our own lives, our own teetering stack of Legos, we look to Jesus in faith. As Paul wrote, Jesus “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” During this Lenten season, we might be more mindful of the flaws in our construction, of the places where we would rebuild, if only we could. Out of love for us, Jesus does just that. Every day, those who have been baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection can come before God, the great Builder, to confess our mistakes, our flawed construction. And Jesus rebuilds us every day. When the Father looks at us, He doesn’t see our Picasso-esque Lego life, but His Son’s perfect life. The miracle of faith – believing that God has done this for us – makes a new life in Jesus possible. He guides our hands in putting the bricks in the right place as we build our lives from day to day. Jesus makes us worthy.

So how are we to avoid thinking ourselves more worthy than others? How can we guard against our inclination to think ourselves extraordinary? Well, you *could* go out to a local toy store, or even one of the Lego stores here in northern Virginia, and buy yourself a little Lego kit. If you carry one of those little plastic bricks in your pocket, you can reach for it every time you start to think that you’re exceptional, better than the rest, and remember that none of us are worthy before God with the lives we’ve built. But even if you don’t have a Lego with you, you can remember Jesus’ love for you. Even though you and I are not exceptional or special, we are important to God – as are those people over whom we’d thought to elevate ourselves. In this time of Lent, when you recall the pile of Legos that is your life under construction, remember your faithful God, Who is at work to build something glorious and worthy in you.

Thanks be to our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Son of God, the One who is worthy, the One on whom our faith is built.

Amen.