

"A Building from God"

Last weekend we put our house on the market. So I've been thinking a lot about what St. Paul calls "the earthly tent we live in." Which is NOT how it's described in the real estate listing. It's a "painted brick ranch on a quiet cul-de-sac" with a "remodeled kitchen" and a "backyard haven." Our amazing realtor stopped just short of calling it "heaven on earth."

But that's, of course, what we wanted people to think when they saw the house. *Now here's a place where we could live.* It's not just a house we're selling. It's a better life.

A week ago Thursday, the night before the house went on the market, I was at home, running around, trying to make everything perfect. Fresh flowers on the dining room table, a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter, brand new towels in the bathroom. Outside, I surveyed the mulch beds. There were little irregularities—divots and mounds—caused by rain and cats, so I moved handful of mulch here, a piece of mulch there.

We were selling a home where rain would never cause mulch to run off into the driveway, nor cats treat a flower bed like a litter box. A home where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

You don't really want your prospective home buyers being put in mind of the Gospel, do you? Nor certainly the words Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

No, what we are selling is a renewed outer nature. A remodeled kitchen. Fresh paint. Perfect flower beds. Because the market for a renewed outer nature is very hot right now. A renewed inner nature? That's a tough sell.

Paul is doing his best to make that sell. Like God's real estate agent, here's how he describes the house: "an eternal glory beyond all measure... a building from God... eternal in the heavens."

It sounds really good. There's just this one little catch. We can't see it. I know it's real. I know it's the most important thing. But the things I can see with my eyes keep distracting me. There were weeds to pull and azaleas to prune and flowers to water.

As I came around to the back yard, carrying the watering can, I saw the pink Gerber daisies that I'd planted a few days before. The flowers were all bent over. The vibrant pink had faded to a pale and sickly color. Some were losing petals. They looked awful.

How had this happened in just three days? I had to sit down. I realized suddenly how tired I was. More than physical exhaustion, I felt soul weary, a kind of despair that made it impossible to go on fixing things. No matter how much I did, it would never be perfect.

It was a despair much deeper than dying daisies. And it wasn't about selling our house, which I needn't have worried so much about anyway—it sold pretty quickly. But that feeling reminded me of a night many years ago when I couldn't fall asleep. I was a child of seven or eight, lying in the dark, and a feeling beyond name—something like despair soaked in terror—had overcome me and I just began to sob and sob.

My mother came in and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbed my back and asked what was wrong. I could barely choke out the words. I had to go to the dentist, and I was terrified that I had a cavity. Maybe many cavities.

My fear of the dentist had put me directly in touch with a much deeper fear—perhaps the deepest fear—that I was somehow rotten inside, hollow and broken at my very core.

In today's Old Testament reading, from the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve have just eaten the fruit they weren't supposed to eat. They hear God coming so they hide. Now I've always imagined they hide because they're afraid of God, coming like an angry parent to punish them. But that's not what the text says.

When God calls to Adam and Eve, the man replies, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Adam wasn't afraid of God. He was afraid of himself—that there was something deeply wrong with him—and so he covered himself up and hid. It's the fear that came over me in my bed that night about the dentist, that he would shine his light inside my mouth and see something truly awful. So I just wept and apologized over and over, "I'm sorry I didn't brush my teeth better."

God bless my mother for sitting there with me, confused as she probably was, when I felt broken and unlovable, when I was afraid of myself.

My temptation when I am feeling afraid and unlovable has always been, like Adam, to hide. I'm sure I pulled the covers over my head so Mom wouldn't hear me crying. But it wasn't a very big house. Also, blankets aren't much of a sound barrier.

That's how I am with God sometimes, too. I've got my head under some metaphorical covers. Not realizing what an absurd hiding spot it is. Not realizing that the very thing I think I need to hide—my fear, my shame—is drawing God to me. Like a mother in the night, coming to sit on my bed with me.

As an adult, my hiding spots tend to be projects. I'm a bit of a perfectionist, you know? It's nice to have something to fix when I'm feeling broken. Please God, just let me obsess over some mulch. I can make that look real neat and clean and good.

And that makes me feel better for a bit.

But then I noticed those dying daisies. The ones I had planted just three days ago. And as I sat there, not quite crying, but feeling exhausted and hopeless, that things would never be quite right, God came and sat with me.

In the stillness, I heard the same message that Paul proclaims: "Do not lose heart. Though your outer nature is wasting away, your inner nature is being renewed day by day." I felt the truth of that, and then I smiled as I imagined the real estate listing God might have written:

“Painted brick ranch on a quiet cul-de-sac. But don’t let the fresh paint fool you. This earthly tent is wasting away. It will never be perfect. Your efforts to improve it—all your trips to Home Depot—cannot make me love you more than I already do. The more this house disappoints you, the better. The more things break and fail, the more you will see through them to your true home, the place I have prepared for you.”

It’s a terrible real estate listing. But it’s very good news. “We have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”