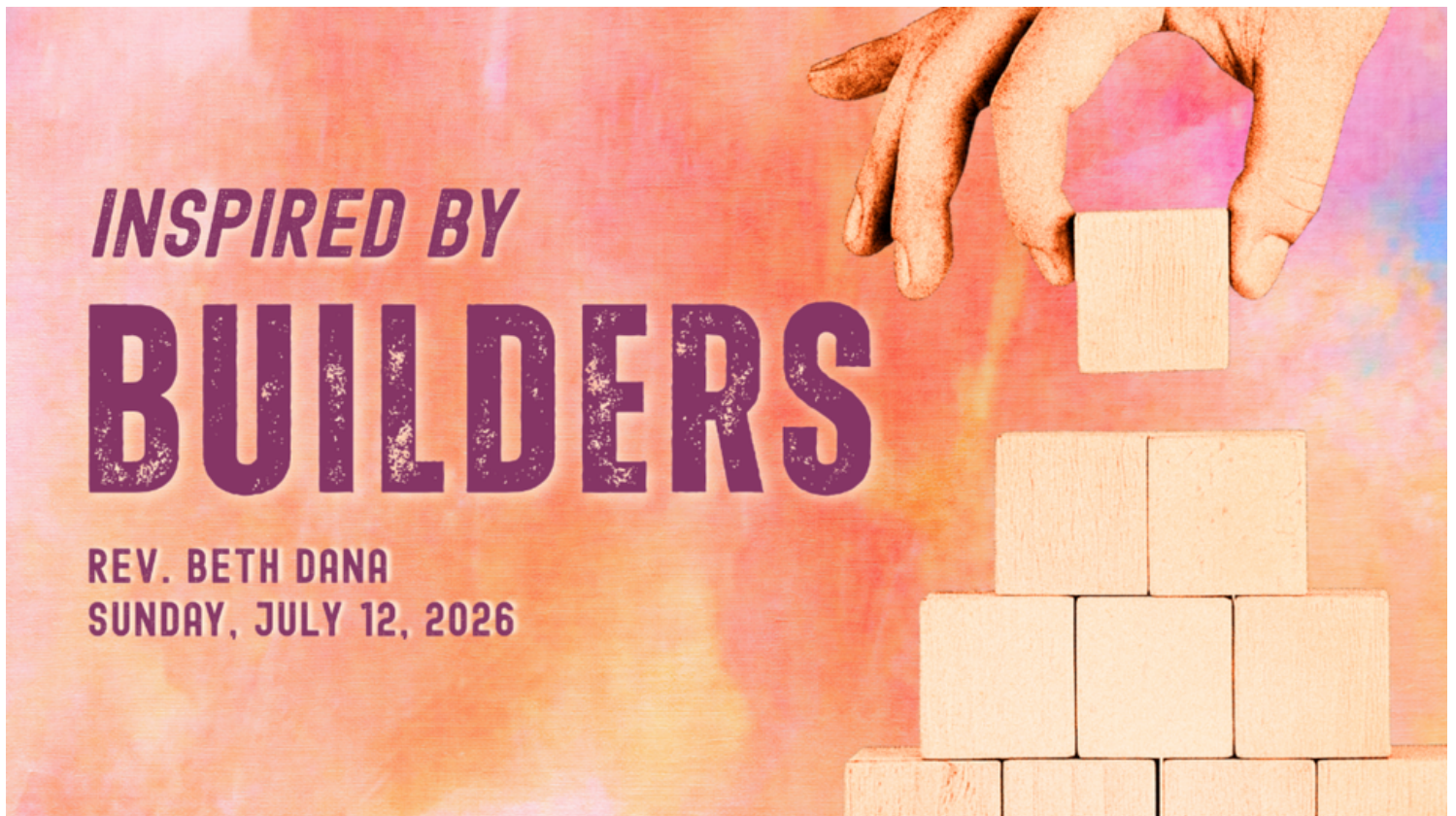




There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to tear down and a time to build. Such is life, says the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes, part of the wisdom writings of the Hebrew Bible. A time to tear down and a time to build. A time to deconstruct and a time to add on. A time to preserve and a time to start over fresh. A year ago, The New York Times published a story about Chen Tianming, a 43-year-old calligraphy salesman, insurance agent and package courier, who moved back to his family's home in a rural corner of Guizhou Province in Southwestern China, when city authorities ordered that his village be demolished to make way for a resort.

His parents, farmers who had built their home there in the 1980s, thought the city officials were not offering enough compensation and they refused to leave. Mr. Chen and his brother decided to add a third floor to the home, not because they needed the space, but because compensation was determined by square footage. And if the house had a third floor, the city would have to pay them more money. But then he just kept building all by himself. He added a fourth floor, a fifth, a sixth. He enjoyed the challenge. "Every time I completed my own small task or dream," he said, "it felt meaningful." All the other neighbors moved away into high rise apartment buildings a few miles away, but his family home remains surrounded by fields of knee-high grass and the rubble of their former neighbor's homes. His family home with its growing height has become, as The Times' story says, a monument to his determination to live where and how he wants, in defiance of the local government, gossiping neighbors, and seemingly even common sense.

The house now has 11 stories. Mr. Chen's parents and brother live on the first floor. On the fifth floor, there's a library and a reading nook. On the sixth floor is a tearoom. And with each floor that he built,

he moved his bedroom up. Each morning, he carefully inspects the house, adding reinforcements as needed. After a storm blew through destroying the fifth floor wall, he tore down most of the walls on the lower floors so that wind could blow through freely. This reminds me a little bit of those home renovation TV shows. Does anybody watch those? Yeah, I see a few nods. They always, always encounter something unexpected, a relational issue or conflict or a structural issue that requires them to change plans and get creative. This is just a part of building.

The Guizhou Province Resort Project stalled after the local government ran out of money, so there's a little threat of demolition at this time. Neighbors and curious tourists are certain that the house will topple, but Mr. Chen says, "As long as I'm still standing, it will be too." Mr. Chen's creativity, determination, and careful tending and maintenance of his family home are inspiring. It defies common sense for sure, but there's a lesson in his insistence on building when the powers that be are carelessly tearing down all around him. When I chose this sermon topic months ago and was reflecting on the inspiration that comes from builders, little did I know what would be happening right now as I preach it.

A building in Midtown Manhattan is on the verge of collapse because of careless development without proper structural planning. Unlike Mr. Chen and his ever-growing tower of a house, they surely had a lot more people and experts involved in the decision making to add on to that building in Manhattan. Not the builder's fault. Nor did I know the bitter political conflict would have erupted around Dallas's City Hall building, and whether to restore this architecturally significant structure or tear it down and redevelop the area. We face this question to tear down or to build and preserve all the time here in Dallas. And we have a history of tearing down, destroying neighborhoods and marginalized communities in particular in the process.

But I'm not going to go down the rabbit hole of Dallas politics in this sermon, because you would all leave here feeling agitated in a bad way. But let's just say it's an important question to consider always, to tear down or to build, to preserve or to start over. In our own lives, which we've built from experiences and relationships and memories and stories, we come to times when we ask the question, is this a time to build or a time to tear down? We build structures, physical structures, relational structures, family structures, spiritual frameworks, habits of being and doing, which bring our stories and our values to life and they sustain us, but sometimes they become sources of stagnation.

As we continue to grow, these structures just can distract us from what's important and hold us back. And our journey can't continue unless the structures are torn down or at least renovated. It takes courage and love to be a builder, knowing that no structure lasts forever. To find meaning in the process, like Mr. Chen adding floor after floor to his home or like the bricklayers in Reverend Barnhouse's story, building brick wall after brick wall. Barnhouse writes of the bricklayer. I wonder how he can love building walls day after day, handling bricks, teaching the art of laying bricks. Is it the teaching he loves, seeing how his students learn what their styles are, how their work shows their character?

Or does he love the wall itself? Does he know about when it'll be done? Does he look forward to seeing it finished? Or does he love the process, the feel of the bricks in his hands, the squish of the mortar, the challenge of making the symmetry of pillars and arches, the geometry of it? I think, she says, from the look on his face, what he loves is the process. To build, knowing that what you create will one day come down, but going ahead and building anyway, this takes imagination and a sense of one's place in the bigger picture. On rainy days, too hot or too cold days, when my family needs a change of scenery and the kids need to move around, we sometimes go to NorthPark Mall. We always check out the variety of artwork and the seasonal plantings.

The ducks and turtles are always a hit, as are the sloped planters that children have been climbing and sliding down for generations. And we don't tend to visit a lot of the stores, but there is one that we can never skip. And that is the Lego store. We go not for the expensive Lego sets, because my son will just mix the pieces in with the rest of his collection and build his own original creations. But we go for the area in the back of the store, which has a floor to ceiling wall of clear built-in bins, each with Lego pieces of a different color and shape. Millions of Lego pieces available for picking and choosing to build anything you can imagine.

MD has built vehicles, animals, and even an underwater temple complete with sea creatures and plants and treasures. The last time we went, it was MD and a man probably four times his age, using the ledge across from the bins to carefully build their creations. The love of Lego building transcends age. MD can spend a long time in the back of the Lego store, but when it's time to go, he puts any loose pieces back in the bins and leaves whatever he built there on the ledge for others to enjoy and to destroy. Creativity, love, and courage. Builders are not architects who develop the designs or plans or the vision of how a building will take shape. Builders are not engineers. They don't always have the expertise in structural integrity, safety, and stability.

Builders are not developers who deal with the business side of the project and have a vision for the impact of the building on its surroundings. Builders are the people who organize resources, implement solutions, create scaffolding, and lay the stones that bring to life a collective vision. Without builders, we have big visions and technical expertise, but none of it comes to fruition. In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, *The Builders*, he writes, "Let us do our work as well, both the unseen and the seen. Make the house where gods may dwell beautiful and tire and clean. Else our lives are incomplete, standing in these walls of time, broken stairways where the feet stumble as they seek to climb."

Builders are those who see themselves as part of something larger, building a house where gods may dwell and take satisfaction and pride in being a part of the whole, whether their work is seen or unseen. Brick by brick, story by story, love by love." Last week, our church lost a builder, as we heard in the prayer. Longtime church member, Karen Lewis, who served on the church staff for over 20 years and built much of the structure of children's ministries in our church as we know it today. Sumfun, our summer camp, Karen had a part in creating that. The Ninth Grade Odyssey and Coming of Age programs, the utterly unique fall retreat and the Boston Heritage trip, Karen built those. The Christmas pageant in which children act out the story of the first Christmas, Karen built it as we

know it today. The Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education, not just in eighth grade, but at the formative ages of first grade and sixth grade, Karen made that happen.

The youth service trip, Karen started that. Karen built on the strong foundation created by religious educators, Ruth Clark and Norma Varadan before her. And when she retired in 2020, she had been a builder under the visionary leadership of many ministers. She was not someone who sought lots of attention for her work, but she knew it was meaningful. And saw herself as a contributor to a larger whole, to building a community in which all people, but especially children, may grow in harmony with the divine. She passed along the leadership of children's ministries to me. And now Shelley Ruprecht serves as our director of children's ministries, building on the good, loving, courageous work of Karen, deconstructing, rebuilding and evolving what we do, but on the foundation that Karen laid. Brick by brick, story by story, we build a church. Seeing the patterns, the symmetry, the plain joy of setting one story on the other, sustained by the strong and beautiful structures they make.

We will never be finished, writes Reverend Barnhouse. Indeed, we will never be finished. Unitarian universalism is a living tradition, never finished. And this church, in quite a unique way, carries forward traditions while also being remarkably open to unbuilding and rebuilding, experimentation and creativity. And each of you is part of this never ending journey of building and rebuilding, adding bricks to bricks, and stories to stories, love to love. We build, knowing that with the next generation may emerge different needs and new truths and wider visions, that buildings may fall and the ways we live out our values may change, but the building is no less meaningful. Today, some of you may join this church after the service, putting your name in the membership book, indicating your commitment to be a builder of this community. And whether that's you or whether you've been a member here for many years, I wonder what moves and inspires you to be this kind of builder.

While your journey in this church may very likely include both deconstruction and reconstruction of your personal faith and religious identity, you are joining with others to add to the story of this place, to make it a house of love and welcome, a house of hope, a house of courageous imagination, a house of healing and forgiveness, a house of impact on the lives of all who dwell in it and the lives of those who will never step foot in one of these buildings here at Preston and Normandy in Dallas. This is the larger vision to which each of us builds, the whole of which each of us is a part. What we build today in our lives, in our communities, in our church, helps tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow find its place. So, keep building, my friends. May it ever be so. And amen.