

Symbols of Lent: Hammer & Nails

Acts 2:22-24 (NIV)

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

When you think of hammer and nails, what's the first thought that comes to mind? Is it the building of your first home or that time you re-shingled your roof? Is it a special carpentry project? Is it something simple like hanging up pictures or something as big as a church renovation project? You probably have something specific in mind when you think of a hammer and nails, but it most likely has some idea of construction.

A hammer and nails are meant to hold things together, to fasten them, secure them. Rarely are a hammer and nails used together to destroy things, but it's also not completely unheard of. From the Bible, in the book of Judges, a gory story is told of a woman named Jael who killed the commander of the Canaanite armies, Sisera, who had oppressed the Israelites, by driving a tent peg through his skull. At some point in history, people decided to use a hammer and nails to fix people to wood as a form of capital punishment. The Romans did not invent crucifixion, but they are the most well known for using it and some say that they perfected it. They employed the constructive properties of the hammer and nails to destroy a man's life. This, of course, we know was done to Jesus of Nazareth. The Apostle Peter proclaimed to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, "This man was handed over to you... and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." (verse 23)

Jesus' crucifixion was not the first time that something that was designed to build things up was used instead to tear things down, that something constructive was used for destruction. When have you used the tools that God has given you to tear down and destroy instead of using them to build up and construct? Maybe you have some vandalism in your past where you actually and purposefully destroyed property with a hammer. More likely, though, is that you used a different tool that God has given you to destroy instead of build up: your tongue. It's such a little thing and yet it makes a big impact. Words from the tongue can bring people together and fix things, but they can also tear people apart.

Remember that time when you came home and found that your spouse hadn't done anything while you were away. "You never respect my wishes. You leave everything for me to do. You never lift a finger. You never help. You're worthless. Why am I even married to you?" And then your spouse maybe exploded in equal measure: "Then why did you marry me? I had a hard day at work. I want a little peace and quiet before I have to go back again in the morning. Do you really expect me to do all these things in addition to putting bread on the table? If you are really that unhappy with me, maybe we should call this quits, split up, get a divorce." Remember when you were hurt when things didn't go your way. "How dare you do this! Oh, I will just sit back and wait and watch. When you fail, I'll be there to say, 'I told you so.'" A hand was extended, and you refused to shake it because you were still upset. A smile and a greeting was given, and you turned up your nose to it. You complained about that person at work and their attitude or maybe even about your kids and the way that they behave. All these actions, these words, they destroy and tear down relationships, relationships with our spouse, with our friends, with fellow Christians, with our kids, relationships even with strangers. The tongue was meant to build up and encourage and praise and glorify God. To have both praise and cursing come from the tongue, to destroy with the same tool meant to build up, this should not be.

Each word that we have said to tear down instead of build-up, it's a hammer strike into the nails that pierced Jesus's flesh on that cross. What we do to tear other people down, that's a wicked deed, a sin, the very things that Jesus went to the cross to pay for. And this is not the kind of nail you would use for framing walls or for hanging a picture. No, this is a big nail, and it brings big pain. As of yet, I have not stepped on a nail. So, I don't know that specific pain firsthand. But I figure as much as I hate needles, I can only imagine the difference from a little needle going into me to the idea a common nail puncturing my skin and then to the nails that pierced Jesus. We cannot absent ourselves from those who actually drove the nails into Jesus' body, just as those to whom Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem could not. We are just as responsible. Just as guilty. Our sins, our deeds, our words, we nailed Jesus to the cross. We put him to death by our sins against him.

We humans have a talent of turning construction into destruction. Sometimes all it takes is a word to do this. Yet, don't overestimate our destructive ability and God's constructive power. Peter preached to the crowd, "Jesus of Nazareth...was handed

over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge." (verses 22-23) The wicked men – and that includes you and me – who put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross did not take Jesus by force. No, God let us. He allowed this to happen. He knew that it was going to happen. It was his deliberate. Even with all our destructiveness, we cannot destroy God's plans.

God's deliberate plan was that the Son of Man would be fastened to a cross by nails and then lifted up that everyone who looked on him and believed in him as their Savior from sin would be saved. Jesus knew in advance that this was going to happen to him. He even said so to his disciples. As they nailed him to the cross, Jesus petitioned his Father in heaven, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Jesus was doing this to construct something, to make salvation for all the people of the whole world. He allowed himself to be fastened with nails to the cross to give all people forgiveness of sins by his death died for them.

This was all a part of God's plan. He allowed Jesus to suffer death, to be destroyed by hammer and nails, in order to construct our salvation. Jesus deliberately died so that we would be forgiven for every time that we have used our tools, our body, our tongue, to tear down instead of build up. Jesus turned those nails around and instead, as Paul wrote in Colossians chapter 2: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." (verses 13-14) After wicked men, like you and me, had accomplished putting Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." (verse 24) God made Jesus alive after his death to show his approval over Jesus' sacrificial death planned and carried out by him, not us. God used what we intended for destruction and turned it into construction – the construction of the salvation of the world.

God constructed your salvation even while we used a hammer and nails trying to destroy it. What now will you do in response? You may be in a place, like here at Light of the Valley, where we can literally use a hammer and nails to build up this building we gather in to listen to God's Word and serve one another. But more than just manual labor, let's use the gifts God has given us to build and strength what the church really is: people. Let words of encouragement, hope, and love leap from our tongues instead of words of criticism and hate and spite. Let's build each other up by carefully choosing what we say to one another. Let everything we say be beneficial for our brothers and sisters in Christ, that it would build them up. Let's use our words to speak well of our spouses, our children, our families, our friends. Let's use our words and actions to tell and show others the great salvation that God has built for them and us through the use of hammer and nails and a wooden cross.

In the end, whether or not we use the tools that God has given us to build up the Church, God will continue to build on it. No matter how many wicked people try to destroy what God has built, God's plans cannot be thwarted. He will continue to build his church no matter the adversity. The salvation that Christ won for us is fixed in our lives. Jesus allowed himself to be nailed to a cross so that our destructive ways are forgiven. We, in turn, build our lives on what he accomplished for us. God, help us use the tools you have given us – our bodies, our tongues - to build your Church. Amen.