

Who and What is the Church?

“In him you also are being built with all the others into a spiritual dwelling place for God.” Ephesians 2:22

In the passage read to us today by Bruce from Second Samuel, we hear about a grateful king who wants to honor his God. What an admirable instinct. Who can question David for wanting build a splendid temple? After years of waging battle with neighboring countries, David had received God’s gifts of peace and prosperity - security from his enemies on all sides - and a royal palace. A grand building of cedar as a gift of thanks to God would be perfectly in order. David, after all, had a palace. Shouldn’t God, the power behind David’s successes, enjoy a dwelling place even greater, more magnificent?

We understand and appreciate David’s desire because we know the profound benefits of such a building. We’ve had the experience of walking into a sacred space that transports us from the usual pace and inevitable pettiness of our daily lives. For us, when worshipping in the Meeting House, we come up the steps and through the doors from a loud and busy street, and are immediately comforted and soothed by the calmness within, the lovely proportions of the building, the familiar sight of the graceful arch in front of the church, our orderly pews, the ornate chandeliers which somehow fit into their more sober surroundings, our gem-like windows below and the clear, clean light from the upper story. Some of us have had the experience of walking into a place of worship and literally gasping in awe – the sheer height, the walls carrying such weight and yet letting in so much light, carvings everywhere of saints and angels, a deep sense of centuries of tradition and an awareness of our predecessors in the faith. We bow our heads and pray and feel God’s presence keenly through the magnificence of the building.

When David comes up with the idea of glorifying God by building a permanent structure in His name, the prophet Nathan agrees with him. After all, David is king because God has blessed him. With God's help, David has established Israel's greatness against impossible odds – this shepherd boy, last to come before Samuel's eyes as a candidate for kingship, this man whom God chose above his taller, older brothers. David had every reason to want to express his gratitude to God by creating a temple that would reflect God's glory. Nathan blesses David's proposal saying, "Do whatever you have in mind, for the Lord is with you."

But God has a different reaction, and doesn't wait to be asked before He expresses it. He speaks to Nathan that very night in a dream. Through Nathan, God first reminds David of all He has done for him, since the days he "took David from the pastures and from following the sheep to be prince over ... Israel." Second, he pledges that David's house will continue to prosper – it's not God's house that is God's focus, but the 'house' or 'dynasty' of His beloved David. After David dies, a house for the Lord may be built, but, says God, it is not to be of concern to David. Third and most important, God declares that He will never remove His love from David, a promise echoed in our responsive reading this morning. The central message of the dream is that God has always been with David, no matter how nomadic a life David has led, and that God's love will never be withdrawn from him; God's presence and promise in no way depend on His having a man-made dwelling place. The early Christians, we remember, had no churches for the first three hundred years of their existence. They were forced to worship on the sly - in each other's homes, catacombs, whatever secret gathering place they could find. Not until Constantine was converted at the beginning of the 4th century could Christians give a thought toward constructing a place in which to worship. But God was with those people, during those 300 years, who had no safe place, no tastefully ornamented arch, no beautiful windows.

And of course, we must look at our own beginnings hundreds of years ago. Thomas Hooker's plain wooden hut housed our own congregation (and the government) after arriving in Hartford in 1636. It burned once, then again, through four iterations and yet the small band grew.

The church from the very beginning was its people, its people inspired and held together not by buildings but by the Holy Spirit. And at the very start, there were problems about who those people could be. Membership problems. Jewish followers of Christ had a problem with those Gentiles! What to do with them? Many of them had been out-and-out persecutors! To say the least, they had not been part of Jewish history, they didn't know about God's covenants (one of them being the one pledged to David), they weren't circumcised. They were known as a people without hope, without God – or at least an acceptable God. How to accept these “strangers”, people “excluded from the community of Israel”? Should the early church accept such people? And if they did, wouldn't non-Jews always be second-class citizens?

We in the United Church of Christ can rejoice in our history of stretching our arms wide and then wider to include a vast diversity of people in our membership and in the make-up of our clergy. Sometimes our arms ache from the exercise – yea, our arms approach being dislocated - but we know that our heritage is one in which the ‘strangers’ and ‘those that are far off’, people who are considered ‘separate from Christ,’ are to be embraced and included in the worship services we hold and in the service we perform in the community. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he points the way to that community's future, away from their Gentile vs. Jew worries: he declares that the physical rite of circumcision is only that – a physical rite with no relationship to the life of the spirit, that a past history which might include profound enmity is to be laid aside; strangeness, or a quality of being “far off” is to be disregarded. Why? Because, as Paul wrote, “Jesus annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace.” “So he came”, continues Paul, “and proclaimed the good news: peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near.”

Jesus constantly challenges us to open ourselves to what we might consider strange, far off or alien in our fellow human beings and fellow members. What might we here in Hartford consider strange and far off, alien?.....That woman behaves in a way I just don't understand – her reactions seem illogical to me. She is so difficult to work with! Comes from some strange religious tradition probably

– maybe she was a Catholic. Her skin is a different color from mine. Her English has such an odd accent. I'm sure she wouldn't vote for the people I'd vote for. And she wears too much make-up!.... We are reminded by the words of Paul that those barriers, and barriers far more challenging, have been broken down by Christ, and that we must follow him through the opening he has created into a unity with all of humanity.

In the gospel reading today, we are given a picture of Jesus and his disciples surrounded by masses of humanity, from one scene to the next. The disciples have just returned from a mission of some kind, and report to Jesus what they have been doing. As a good shepherd would do, Jesus wants to provide them with food and rest after all their work, so he suggests they move to a remote place to refresh themselves. But people see them, recognize them as healers, and, gauging where they are headed in their boat, do an end-run, arriving at the remote place before Jesus and his disciples do. Jesus sees the people gathered there and takes pity on them, for they are like sheep without a shepherd – something you and I understand. What patience and love it must have taken to tend immediately to their needs! Imagine how exhausted, hungry and in need of peace and quiet Jesus and his disciples were! After teaching and feeding the 5,000, Jesus sends the disciples across the lake ahead of him in order to have some time to think and pray alone. But, he sees that the disciples are in danger of capsizing and must rescue them, then continues with them to Gennesaret. The minute Jesus sets foot on land, he is recognized, and a huge crowd gathers in the market place, pressing up against him in hopes of being touched by him, and the whole frantic scene starts all over again. Many are desperate, so they crowd closer and closer to him in order to touch the hem of his clothing. The scene is claustrophobic, dusty, loud, chaotic! The man is besieged. There is no rest, no privacy, no time to contemplate, hardly enough air to breathe – he must teach, feed, rescue and heal, one responsibility after the other, and he includes one and all.

Who were these people? Farmers, poor people, men and women of all walks of life, beggars, cripples – who knows. Where did they come from? From all over the countryside. Who was it, the group in Ephesus struggled to understand, who

would be the legitimate members of the new Christian community? Jew and Gentile, was Paul's answer. I want to build you a magnificent temple, said David. No, said God, leave that to one of your sons. What's important is that you know that I give you my promise that I will dwell with you always no matter where you are.

So a church in essence is not a building, it doesn't require a building. It is God's never-ending promise to us men, women and children, it is our relationship with God, and it is our relationship with one another that create a church.

If we are fortunate enough to have a beautiful place in which to worship, the building cannot qualify as a church if it is empty of people. Who are, and who may be the members of our church? Jesus destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile, the rich man and the beggar, the tax collector and the priest, the despised prostitute and the woman at the well, the homeless and the housed, the hungry and the well-filled, the scholarly and the illiterate. Each of us is in that list somewhere, with all our faults and misgivings, and so are all the people of this city. In Paul's words to the Gentiles, "You also are being built with all the others into a spiritual dwelling for God." We are being built...each one of us is being built...the church is *being built* – right now - into a spiritual dwelling for God. How? By accepting, teaching, feeding, rescuing and healing, one after the other, including in our embrace one and all.

You and I stand as rocks --- in the foundation, the walls, the entire building of our church. The walls are strongest when they are no longer barriers. Let our walls be witnesses and welcomers to a constant flow of humanity.