

Temple Building

In the name of him who is perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, dear friends in Christ: It wasn't very long ago, about eleven or twelve years now, that this congregation was deeply involved in a church building project. I'm sure many of you remember that time, with all of its challenges and joys as so many things good were accomplished. And something we did as we tackled the project that I believe led to its overall success was to try, as much as possible, to involve everyone in one way or another. So we had, besides the building committee itself, committees for the interior design and decorating, the kitchen, the yard and landscaping, the stained glass windows, and several others. Back then a person had to try pretty hard *not* to be involved in the project, and no one could say they didn't have an opportunity to help or that their input wasn't welcome. No, for the most part we had the whole group of us all pulling together to achieve the same goal. And I don't mind saying that in the end things came out amazingly well. Certainly this house of worship – this *temple* of the Lord – is something for which we can be exceedingly grateful to God.

The reason I bring this up is that in today's Epistle, St. Paul is talking about an *ongoing* church construction project. Writing to the Christian congregation at Corinth, he asks them, "Do you not know that you [collectively] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in the midst of you?" It's a fascinating thing for Paul to say for at least two reasons. The first is what he means by it. When he calls that group of believers God's temple, he doesn't mean it in some weird esoteric or merely symbolic sense. It's not just a word picture. No, he means that's what the congregation at Corinth actually is: the holy temple of the one true God in that city.

That's interesting because Corinth, like most Greek cities, was full of temples. They were everywhere, on practically every street corner. There were temples for Zeus and Mars and Hermes and Poseidon and Hera and Aphrodite to name but a few. And something all of these pagan temples shared in common was that in each one there was an idol image of the god or goddess to whom the temple was dedicated. A lot of people these days think that the pagans actually believed that these idols *were* their gods; but that's not right. The ancients weren't that stupid. They understood that the idols were only representations of their gods. And the reason they needed representations was because the gods and goddesses themselves weren't here. Not at all; depending on the god, they lived up on mythical Mount Olympus or in the sea or in Hades, the underworld. They weren't *here*. In their temples, nobody was home. So the pagans put idols in them to represent gods who were essentially absent with the thought that by addressing the idol images and worshipping them, the gods *who were not here* could somehow see, hear, and appreciate their devotion. You might think of the idols as worship telephones: they were a way to communicate with absent, far away gods.

That's what made the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem so completely unique. In it there was no idol. The Lord had forbidden it. The most obvious reason for this was that nothing in all of creation could even remotely begin to represent him. How do you portray in wood or stone or precious metal a being who is a holy, all powerful, all knowing, everywhere present spirit? It can't be done. And while that's true, a bigger, less obvious reason for the Lord not wanting an image of himself in the temple was because unlike the false gods who didn't dwell among men, *he did*. The Lord made a point of showing the people that he was truly present in his temple. And yes, God is everywhere; but in the temple he showed that he was with his people in a very special way. "This is where I have placed my gracious presence in your midst", he told them.

“This is where I will live among you. This is where I want you to offer your sacrifices and your prayers. This is where I will hear you and forgive your sins.” And God’s people understood that. Theirs wasn’t a temple for an absent god. In the holy of holies, the innermost sanctuary behind a heavy veil, the Spirit of God was present above the Ark of the Covenant. So God’s people didn’t need an idol to represent him – no long distance telephone – they could address the Lord directly with their prayers and praises because he was here.

What they couldn’t do, however, was go stand in his presence. The Lord was in the sanctuary dwelling in the midst of his people; but the people couldn’t go in there where he was. Why? Because they were sinners, and sinners cannot stand in the presence of the holy God and live. It would destroy them. And that’s why the temple of the Lord was arranged the way it was with barriers and walls keeping people out. It was for their protection.

Now to be sure, the Lord could be approached by certain individuals; but only according to his instructions. These were specially designated priests at specially designated times, and always only with sacrifices – atoning sacrifices by which animals died in the place of sinners and through which the Lord graciously forgave the sins of his people. Only in this way could the Holy God live among sinners. Now, these sacrifices all foreshadowed and pointed to the ultimate sacrifice for sin that Lord himself would offer when Jesus, the holy Lamb of God, gave up his life on the cross. And you may remember that in the instant Jesus died, the temple veil that concealed the Lord’s glory tore from top to bottom. This didn’t happen to say that now it was possible for sinners to go in there; but rather to say that the Lord’s Spirit could come out and dwell in and with his people directly. All who trust in the sacrifice Jesus made, all who are covered and protected by his atoning blood, receive the Holy Spirit who dwells within them. This was first shown in a powerful way at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit of God descended from above and took up residence in each believer. And it continues to go on in a less spectacular but no less miraculous way every time the Gospel of Jesus Christ is declared and sinners come to repentance and faith in him.

So this is what Paul is saying to the congregation at Corinth. God once lived in the temple in Jerusalem, and only there. That’s where his Spirit dwelt among his people. But now thanks to Jesus and the perfect sacrifice he gave of himself, the Holy Spirit of the one true God lives in a temple of flesh and blood consisting of each one of you individually; but in an even greater sense, in all of you together as you share the same Spirit, the same faith in Jesus, the same salvation and life eternal, and as you share the same love of God with each other. You, together, are God’s house in Corinth. You are the temple in which God is present on earth.

I can’t overstate the significance of that, and what it implies for us, for it means that we are the temple of God in this place. But the second reason it’s so remarkable that Paul would tell them this is that the congregation at Corinth was such a fractured and fragmented mess. The members were practically at war with each other. They had divided up into competing factions that were constantly bickering and struggling for supremacy. Each group imagined that it was the most spiritual and enlightened, and they denigrated the others. It was terrible. For all their fighting there was little visible evidence that God’s Holy Spirit was dwelling in their midst. Nevertheless, Paul tells them it’s true. Despite it all – their sinful behavior, selfish conduct, and arrogant ways – they were still the temple of God.

This is what Paul is explaining at the beginning of the reading we heard. If you’ve been following the Epistle readings for the last several weeks, you know that one of the chief misunderstandings of the members at Corinth was their misguided attachments to the various pastors that had served the church in its brief history. The competing factions each claimed as

their own champion one of these men. So some said they followed Paul, others that they were disciples of Apollos, the man who served the church after Paul. Others said they were disciples of Peter, who had apparently been in the city for a while. When Paul writes this letter, it seems that yet a fourth pastor was serving the church and some claimed to belong to him. And it's easy to see how this might happen. Each pastor in succession had his own unique gifts and style of teaching, as well as his own areas of expertise and emphasis. These variations would have appealed to different members based on their preferences and learning styles. The mistake of the congregation was to think of the pastors as being in competition with each other and of each one having a different message. What the members were really doing, though, was transferring their own spirit of divisiveness onto the men they were claiming as their leaders.

Paul is telling them that they're looking at it wrong. "Think of yourselves as what you are, he tells them: God's temple. And you're under construction. You're a work in progress. As a skilled master builder I laid the foundation. That was my job." What Paul means is that he was the missionary who first proclaimed the Gospel to them. He set down the fundamentals of the Christian faith: the one Triune God, mankind's fallen condition, who Jesus is and what he did to save us on the cross, how we receive Christ's salvation through the Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and how we'll one day be raised with Christ and live with him in glory forever. These truths are the church's creed and confession. They are the foundation upon which everything else that pertains to Christian faith and life stands.

"Your subsequent pastors", Paul tells them, "have been building on that foundation. Each in turn through their teaching, through their ministry of Word and Sacrament, have been building you up to increase your faith, to mature your understanding of God's Word and his will for you, and to exhort and equip you to lead lives that befit those who are indwelt by God's Spirit." Today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons describe what that looks like: caring for the poor and needy, being honest in business dealings, not bearing grudges, not slandering people and hurting their reputations, not resisting evil, but overcoming evil with good, and loving your enemies. These are the sorts of things that adorn God's temple and make his glory visible to the world. That's what we'd like to see increasingly more of, knowing that one day it will all be made perfect. But for the time being you're still under construction. And as everyone knows, sometimes a construction site looks pretty messy. So it is in the church even today. We're still dealing with sinful people who are full of worldly ideas, petty jealousies, and selfish ambitions. In this life we always will be; which is why the church of all ages will always need faithful pastors whose job it is to keep building the Lord's temple.

And Paul has a couple words of warning for these pastors. "Let each one take care how he builds. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is already laid, which is Jesus Christ." The indication is that some will try to build the church on something other than the biblical witness to Jesus and the correct confession of his truth. And certainly we see this today and throughout the history of the church: how various teachers have introduced ideas borrowed from ancient philosophies, from false religions, and more recently from the worldly wisdoms of rationalism and pragmatism. These teachers attempt to build God's temple on a foundation of human wisdom and human works. And to the extent that they do, they are building on sand. They may manage to put together what appear to be magnificent structures – great monuments to themselves; but on the Day of the Lord they will be revealed for what they are: houses of cards built on shaky tables. Like the walls of Jericho, they'll come tumbling down. And sadly, the people they led astray and taught to trust in something other than Christ will be lost.

But even those pastors who build on the foundation of Jesus Christ must ensure that they use quality materials. Paul writes, "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver,

precious stones, wood, hay, or straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done." That is to say not all of the teaching, preaching, and other work a pastor does is of the same worth. A man might be faithful himself and truly trust the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and still fail to effectively convey the truth to congregation he serves. He may be lax in his studies, take short cuts in his sermon and bible class preparations, or he may be unfaithful in prayer. He may be inconsistent in his ability to divide the Word of truth, sometimes proclaiming Law when the Gospel is needed or proclaiming God's forgiveness to those who have not and have no intention to repent. He may pursue all the latest human devised evangelism techniques and stewardship fads because he doesn't trust the Spirit to work through God's appointed means. He may describe the Christian life in glorious terms and then undermine everything he says by publicly living in a way that denies the truth. There are thousands of ways he might keep himself busy doing things he believes to be important but that have no lasting value. On the Day of the Lord these accomplishments will be revealed for the hay and stubble they are. They'll be burned up. Only the work the Spirit of Christ did to build the temple of God through him with the precious, lasting things will remain.

So let's apply all of this to our present situation. The congregation here, this temple of God, is now in its 116th year [St. Timothy, Bedford, 45th year]. In that time you've had a number of pastors each in turn doing his part to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Each pastor had his own unique gifts and shortcomings, his own strengths and weaknesses, and yes, his own sins and failings. But all of them have had only one goal: to build you up in God's wisdom, which is Jesus Christ and him crucified. They were, and I am now, the mouth through which the Lord Jesus continues to teach his people with his words of truth, life, grace, and forgiveness so that his Epiphany – the manifestation of God in flesh – may continue, and so that you may be temple of God under construction here.

Now I'm happy to say that for the time being anyway, we're not a house divided and at odds with itself as badly as was the congregation at Corinth. Our divisions aren't so severe; but there are divisions, for wherever there are sinners, there will be problems like that. It's guaranteed. Our goal needs to be to get rid of them. Just as we once all joined together to build this sanctuary, I'm calling on you now to help build and complete God's temple in this place. My part is to proclaim the Word of Jesus, to speak to you the whole counsel of God, and to try to the best of my ability to use only the best materials that will last. It's your part to hear the Word, to hunger for it, to meditate upon it, and to open your heart so that with it the Spirit who lives in you can build you up in holy faith. It's your part to judge my teaching to ensure that it conforms to biblical truth and the creeds of the church. It's your part to correct me when I err and help me help you by demanding explanations for things you do not understand. It's your part to pray for me that I may fulfill my calling. It's your part to be led by the Spirit to live according to the Word of Christ and to share it with those with whom you come into contact. It's your part to invite them to join us, so that they too may become, through faith in Christ, part of God's temple here.

There's plenty of work to do and we each have a part. Therefore according to the grace and wisdom that God has given us in Christ, let each one of us join together in building God's temple. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!