

Home is a Community

1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:27-30

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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Now King Hiram of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father, for Hiram had always been a friend to David. ²Solomon sent word to Hiram, saying, ³“You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until he^[b] put them under the soles of his feet.^[c] ⁴But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. ⁵So I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord said to my father David, ‘Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.’

²⁷“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today, ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

I don’t know what knucklehead decided to put the dedicate of the Temple as the reading for stewardship Sunday. We ain’t building this. But I am really glad this is our story today. It shows us how our giving holds the potential for great hypocrisy and greater beauty.

Last week in our story, God told King David he could not build a Temple, but that David’s son would. In 1 Kings, Solomon, son of David, does go ahead and build the long-dreamed about home of God. After a few chapters that tell us the details of every screw and drawer pull in Temple, in 1 Kings 8, Solomon stands in front of this brand new, beautiful, ornate, spectacular religious facility and offers a prayer of dedication. Solomon’s prayer is, I think, sincere. But even he sees some of the irony. “O God, even the highest heaven cannot contain you,” Solomon says, “much less this house that I have just built!”

There have been many attempts to create accurate scale models of the Temple according to the details in Scripture (including one built in the 1950s by a professor at Agnes Scott College, but I couldn’t find a good picture of it). This version you’re looking at was created in the 1880s and is at the Met Museum in New York. This building was no joke. You can see how... expensive it is. This Temple was a kind of high-water mark for the Kingdom of Israel. Solomon achieved a short window of peace and prosperity. So he seized the moment and went all in, buying the finest materials from across the Middle East: cedar, stone, bronze. He hires the best artisans, who carve cherubim and flowers. Everything is covered in gold. Resting now in its new home, the Holy of Holies, is the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing the commandments. The ones God gave to Moses. The terms of the people’s covenant with God.

As the scripture tells it, the dedication of this building culminates a journey out of slavery into freedom. God had rescued the people from pharaoh, journeyed with them through the harsh and barren wilderness, and delivered them into this land, this promised land. Finally, they are safe. They have arrived. In so many ways, this should be an unqualified moment of rejoicing, of celebration. God did this for us. Now, we've built God the grand home that God's greatness deserves.

But if you step back, and take a look at the bigger picture, you might observe that there's something wrong with this scene. Something's... off. What is it?

Remember last week? David offered to build a Temple for God to live in. God's response to David was, "Remind me, David, since I brought you out of Egypt, when have I EVER asked you to build me a fancy house?" This is a Wilderness God. It's not clear that God wants a Temple. If you remember, God never thinks having a king is a good idea; it's the people who insist. God doesn't seem convinced a grand religious building is necessary, either.

It's the people who seem to think this building is a good idea. But honestly... does this building honor God? Or does it reify the new-found power and privilege of the people?

Read 1 Kings in its entirety, and the answer jumps off the page. Solomon not only gathered materials and craftsmen to build the Temple, he gathered 80,000 slaves. 80,000 people, the Bible says matter-of-factly, "conscripted" to building a "house of worship." These are the people whom God had led out of Egypt... only to arrive in the land and find that they had *become* Egypt. After Solomon dies, the people begs his successor not to adopt the same policies of forced labor. The king refuses the pleas, and the kingdom splinters into chaos and factions.

You all know by now that I am deeply ambivalent about church buildings. Every year, our session asks, "does this building help us be the community that God calls us to build or not?" It's easy for churches to worship buildings. I visited dozens of churches in Scotland last summer, with tiny congregations, propping up massive, ornate buildings that they can't afford but which, to them, represent God. In truth, they represent Scotland's spoils for participation in the British Empire, built on human slavery and colonialism. It's never clear that our church buildings honor God, or that God even *needs* a building at all.

But I want to stop my critique for a second. Because my critique, while true, isn't fully honest. There's something else going on here in this story of Solomon and the people's relationship to the Temple. It's no different than our relationship to this place. Many of us love this place. It's not just an object—it's not just wood and stone. It's alive. It's full of memories and experiences. Think about the saints whose funerals were held here. Think about the hope in every baptism. Think about the relationships that are made here; the friendships and the flirtations. Think about the learning and the growing that happens here. And the values like love of neighbor that have been nurtured here.

There's something about us that needs a place. Something about us longs for a home. Not just abstractly, but concretely. A place that is secure and trustworthy, a place that can hold us, that can hold memory. Our longing for this kind of home is why so many of us work hard to end homelessness: everyone deserves a daily place of security and peace. The same thing is true for our faith. We need a place to come, week after week, where our songs echo with the voices of our ancestors, where memory and hope can be held. We need a place where we know, if we go there, there's a good chance God will meet us.

You feel the tension now. We long for a home—we ache for a place. But our God does not.

Solomon recognizes this tension. He says, about his new Temple, “this place can never hold God.” God never “lives” in any of our buildings. Our God is wild and free, a God of abandoned places. Our God is not domesticated, not by our buildings, nor even by our theological constructs.

Solomon's tragic mistake is that his commendable impulse to build a home in which people can worship God metastasizes into the worship of something else—his own power, his wealth. The presence of injustice is a rot at the core of the building's foundation. We fool ourselves if we think a church building is more important than building a covenantal community rooted in God's ideas: love, compassion, mercy, peace.

2800 years after Solomon built the Temple, enslaved Black men built a grand white house for the president of a new nation—a nation founded upon the declaration that all people are created equal. None of us are immune from the temptation, in building a home, to build something that honors our security, our power, our privilege, but doesn't covenantal community and doesn't honor God.

There's wisdom in this story of Solomon's Temple that can inform not just the way you approach this church building, but the way you approach all of your giving.

The point—the purpose—of our giving is the creation of covenantal community. Every gift extends relationship. Just as God's giving to us, gathers us into a life-giving relationship with God, our giving to one another can create life-giving relationships.

It doesn't mean that we can't build churches—or maintain the ones we have. It does mean that we can ask, this year and every year, is my giving creating healthy relationships? Is my giving nurturing a community of love, compassion, mercy, and peace?

The Temple in Jerusalem becomes the focus of so much energy both in the Scriptures and even today. Solomon's Temple will be destroyed by the Babylonians in the destruction that leads to the exile. Great effort and energy goes into re-building the Temple after the exile, only to see it destroyed again by the Romans. But there's a strong case to be made that the greatest—and by “greatest” I mean, holiest, most significant, most successful, most

theologically sound—building our ancestors ever built wasn’t the Temple, but the Tabernacle.

In the last chapters of Exodus, there is a long—and frankly, to most of us, tediously detailed and boring—section on the building of the Tabernacle. It’s basically a glorified tent. The glory of the Tabernacle wasn’t its beauty, or its durability. It wasn’t covered in gold leaf, it didn’t have the finest imported raw materials. The glory of the Tabernacle is hidden in plain sight. In Exodus, Chapter 35, it says,

⁴Moses said to the whole Israelite community, “This is what God has commanded: ⁵From what you have, take an offering for the Lord. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering of gold, silver and bronze; ⁶blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ⁷ram skins and leather; acacia wood; ⁸olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; ⁹and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

²⁰Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses’ presence,²¹ and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the tent of meeting,

And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning..., “The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done.”

⁶Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: “No one is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary... because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.”

Whenever you give—whether it’s a pledge to our church, a donation of our time to a friend who needs our help, offering your talents—whenever we give, that gift is an expression of relationship, of mutual belonging. Those gifts, over time, become our own kind of building project. When you give to God, what we’re building—or should I say, what God is building through us—is a world in which human beings make room for one another.

Your giving makes covenantal community. We call it, “Beloved Community.” The only house God has ever asked for. The place we’ll finally know we are “home.”