

## Living in the Temple

A Roman poet who died when Jesus was 2 or 3 years old had already noticed what people do with language, and what language does to us. He said, “Words are like leaves, some wither every year....and every year there is a new crop.” He had seen that the words of any living language have their own life, and that like all life they are forever changing. Word-watchers, avid readers, makers of dictionaries all know this and watch for it. The church, unfortunately, is not always careful about its vocabulary and how words can affect attitudes. So in the last two sermons I delivered before summer vacation we first considered how the early church defined the word “saint” and how differently we use it, and talked next about how strange it is to speak of “going to church” as if church were a place, when the truth is that you and I are the church, whether we are in a building or in a field or traveling on the highway.

If we wanted to be accurate we’d say something like this: “I’m going this morning to the building on 29th where some of us who are the church are in the habit of meeting.” But in daily conversation all of us, including the person speaking, tend to follow the Law of Linguistic Laziness, which is: say it as briefly as possible and count on the listener to interpret what we really mean. So this is not a call to reformation or revolution; it’s just a reminder of certain realities we often forget in our shorthand speech. The oldtime Congregationalists and the Quakers had this in mind when they called their physical plant the *meetinghouse* rather than the *church* , but that took some early training, and all I hoped to do a few Sundays back was ask you

to keep in mind, no matter how our vocabulary may tend to obscure it, that in the classroom, office, living room we are the church....the church that from time to time goes to the meetinghouse for communal worship. I'm not just splitting hairs; if we actually think of ourselves as the church, wherever we are, it will affect how we act in those places. I don't know how this makes **you** feel, but it's not exactly a comforting thought to me. I can be foolish enough in weak or careless moments to be embarrassed by the thought that I carry the church everywhere I go, that I am the *ekklesia*, the "called out," which is what that word means. So maybe it's no wonder we'd rather "go to church" than "be" the church: our sub-conscious misuse makes life easier.

This morning I'd like to talk about two more words, *temple* and *sanctuary*, and how much their meanings have changed from the days when Christianity was still young. I pick up the ways of the world as easily as anybody else, so I often refer to this lovely room as "the sanctuary," which in common usage means nothing more than a large room in a church building where public worship takes place. But the word originally defined a special holy place, that part of a church in which an altar is located. "Alter" is a troublesome word in itself and biblically conscious oldtime Congregationalists avoided using it.

An altar symbolizes the idea that between worshippers and God there needs to stand a priest, a man with special credentials and special access to God, who can make a connection for us. Protestants vigorously rejected that idea, and none of them rejected it with more passion than our Congregational ancestors who crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower*. There is no altar in a Congregational church — a communion table, but not an altar

— because there is no single person in our faith who has easier access to God than anyone else, no official priest ministering at an altar. At least, that's the theory behind our faith because we claim to believe those New Testament statements that we are all priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10). But special privilege, power and access always fascinate us, and so, as every Protestant minister knows, there is always pressure to turn him into THE priest — one who has special “pull” with God, one whose prayers have special power.

So, with no altar and no special office of priesthood, if I were really being careful I would not use the word “sanctuary” for this room. Look it up: “a sacred place...the most holy part of a sacred place.” But if there is one thing the New Testament makes clear, it's the idea that there ARE no special holy days, holy things, holy places. There are only holy people....so that the only sanctuary God has on earth is a consecrated human heart. YOU are God's sanctuary, God's dwelling place. God comes along, in your heart, when you come to this room, but this room is simply a place you have chosen for meeting each other in worship. We could just as legitimately have chosen to meet in Century 2 or in College Hill Park. If that seems to denigrate this room, I can only say that I'm probably fonder of it than almost anyone, but I cannot be true to classic Christian or Congregational thought and make it have a unique holiness in itself.

In Hebrew scripture, God was met on a mountain, in a garden, outside a tent, anywhere, everywhere, but as the Jewish people got more power and wealth and sophistication, they wanted God to have some of the benefits, so King Solomon built God a house....even though some of the prophets said God did not need a

house, or want one. But you know how we are. Once that house was built, and handsomely decorated, it pleased the Jewish people to think that this was where God lived, this was where one could have special access to God. For that temple to be destroyed by fire or warfare was the worst of all possible catastrophes because it dislocated and diffused God — it scattered all that compacted holiness around the countryside.

The highest Jewish thought was always better than that, of course, and centuries later a Jewish scholar named Paul expressed a very different notion. Looking at the shrines in the city of Athens, he said: “God does not dwell in buildings made with hands, nor is worshipped with our hands as though God needed anything.”

The language seems clear enough: don't limit holy places to physical plants, and don't suppose God has to have the elaborate ritual that often takes place inside them. Would Paul be surprised by St. Albans, Central Christian, UCC, Calvary Methodist, E-Free and Eastminster, all within a stone's throw of one another? I think he would. He might also like them, but he certainly would be surprised, and I think he would take pains to point out that unless we are careful, buildings may confine and localize God and make us think that to encounter God we come to a building and enter through a door.

Jesus tried in the most explicit language to teach us better than that. In a talk with a woman at a well in Samaria, a woman who wondered where people ought to go to worship — on Mount Gerizim, nearby, or in Jerusalem — Jesus said, “Believe me, the hour is coming when worship will not be confined to your special place nor one in Jerusalem, but true worshippers will worship God in spirit and in truth.” *God is spirit*, one N.

T. writer says. Whatever else that may mean, it surely suggests that this creative, caring energy is not confined to places. There is no more inherent holiness in this room, despite our calling it a sanctuary, than in your own kitchen, and if you make that kind of distinction you put walls back up between the sacred and the secular, walls Jesus gave his life to tear down.

But, you say, this is where we worship, and surely that makes it special. Not unless it also makes your home, your business, your club special, because you also worship there, or else your idea is radically different from that of the New Testament. Running errands for a sick neighbor is an act of worship, just as much as singing “Faith of our Fathers” together — in my view, an even more significant act of worship than sitting in a comfortable pew and making good sounds. Writing a letter to some lonely person is an act of worship, just as much as hearing \_\_\_\_\_ read the Scripture. Or so, at least, thought the Apostle who wrote most of the New Testament. “Whatever you are doing,” Paul said, whether you speak or act, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.” Everything! Worship does not begin when you enter this room, reach for a book, and start to sing. Moments before, back in the foyer, when you embraced a friend just getting over surgery, assuring that person of your love and concern, you were at worship.

In the temple of this world, Paul says, you offer your very bodies as a living sacrifice. You do not need a priest; you are your own priest. And Paul has no special room, place, or time in mind. It is quite possible that what happens here at times may be less worshipful than what happens at your work, at school, or in your house,

depending on what you do there, and the spirit in which you do it. There is, in the book of Hebrews, a beautiful passage about what worship really is, and it is not connected at all with the idea of an assembly like this one.

Listen to it: “Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise....and never forget to show kindness, and to share what you have with others, for such are the sacrifices which God approves.” I was present when a man who meets in this room saw for the first time in his adult life the great redwood trees in California. What he felt there, and later at the Grand Canyon’s rim, was a form of worship.....worship at its very starting place, which is reverence and awe. If it translated into some kind of sharing, into some kind of change for the better at the very core of life, then it was worship in its fuller sense. Worship is a combination of reverence towards God, and behavior towards people.

Now all this about worshipping anywhere makes sense only if you accept the biblical statement that God lives in each of us, that we are his temples. This room may in fact become holy, but only because it is filled with sanctuaries and temples (that’s us!), with living, loving people who belong to God, who share with each other, who reach out together to help those who need them. “Don’t you know,” Paul asks the Corinthians, “that your bodies are the temples of God?” What a transforming thought that can be! We are the temples, where God lives; we are the priests who offer sacrifice in the temple; and the sacrifice we offer is goodness. The best of the Old Testament prophets knew this perfectly well, and said it, even when it was unpopular. Isaiah, Amos, Micah, Hosea — they all said it. It is not fasting, bowing your head, sacrificing animals on an

altar, that God wants from us. It is, they said, the sharing of your bread with the hungry, the bringing of the homeless poor into some shelter, the clothing of the naked, the relief of the oppressed, the visit to one who is lonely. If you do these things believing this is what God wants, then you are worshipping God at the highest of all levels.

All of this may help some of you to be tolerant of my own feelings about special days in the church calendar. We love to elevate one day above another, but the truth is that our Maundy Thursdays and our Holy Week, even our Easters and Christmases work together to put up again that old distinction Jesus hoped to obliterate. Every day is holy! To make a special effort on Easter is to succumb to the pressure of organized religion and advertising. In the highest form of Christianity, there are no special days, for the simple reason that there are no days which are NOT special. Paul understood: “One person,” he said, “thinks some days of more importance than others. Another person considers them all alike.” I think I know where Paul stood in the matter: special days, special places, special times for worship — they all belong to faith when faith is still a child. Not bad things, kept in perspective, but harmful when they obscure the glorious fact that when we wake up and say with sincere feeling, “This is the day which the Lord has made, I will rejoice in it and be glad,” we have worshipped. If every day is holy, special, the quality of life gets better.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had it right: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God.” Not just the one that impressed Moses, but every one seen in the right spirit. In other words, the

temple is everywhere. The ground where I stand is holy ground if I am the temple of God, and what I do with my life on any given day is God's abiding concern. Is it all just a tempest in a teapot, this concern I'm expressing about words and how they mean? I think not. Remembering from time to time their truest and deepest meanings can make a difference in our lives. May it be so!

Live so in us, O God, that no day passes when we are not in your temple, when we are not at times in that day in the act of worship.