

SERMON: A Dwelling Place for God

TEXT: Ephesians 2:11-22      2 Samuel 7:1-14a

My friend Amy is pastor of United Presbyterian Church in Shawnee, Oklahoma. She's been serving there for about seven years now, and they are in their third location. The original facility, built around 1910, was nearly falling down around them. In the sanctuary, they had to rope off a whole section of pews because ceiling tiles were dropping, fortunately never during Sunday worship. Eventually, they closed the whole sanctuary and worshipped in another room of the church. There was mold in the building – and probably asbestos, as well. Repair of the structure was going to cost somewhere around one million dollars, and they only had 35 members.

Much of Amy's energy has been consumed by this issue, and she has learned so much about many things that are never taught in seminary! But she has led her congregation to a place where they can concentrate their efforts on ministry to the community. When they finally left that place that held so many precious memories, they moved into a storefront that had previously been a coffee house.

They rented that space for two years and made it work. Christmas and Easter worship and so many other special worship services, fellowship, choir

practice, committee meetings, laughter and joy, sorrow and grief. All the things that a church does still happened, despite the lack of steeple and sanctuary.

The previous church building has finally been sold, and seven months ago United Presbyterian Church in Shawnee, Oklahoma, purchased a new, larger space, also a storefront, previously an event venue.

In an article for the Minister's Corner of their local newspaper, Amy wrote this about their new church home. "It is our building, and we are beyond excited and overjoyed and grateful to own it. We are doing the things you do when you buy a place of your own. We are painting, putting in new lighting, deciding on a place for everything and everything in its place, and dreaming of new ministries, new possibilities for doing what God calls us to do. Yet, if we have learned a lesson in these last challenging years, it is that the church is not the building. We are the church. Our congregation – no matter how small or how big, how young or how old – we are the church. While we are thrilled to be in this place, to call it our own, we also know that if those four walls were to go away tomorrow, we would still be the church. We would still be the congregation of United Presbyterian, because the church is not the building."

This is not news to us. Many of us learned it as a song when we were very young. “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people. I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world – yes, we’re the church together!

This is not a difficult concept; we get it. But it is hard to convince our hearts to feel what we know in our minds to be true.

The verses we read from the Old Testament today, tell of King David’s desire to build a house for the Lord. He said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” But Nathan had a dream that night that the Lord said, “No.” “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” God makes it clear he has been present with David “wherever [he] went,” and would continue to go before him to appoint a place for

Israel. God could not settle until God's people were settled. God declared that building a temple would be the responsibility of David's future son.

Then we heard from the letter to the Ephesians, that Jews and Gentiles who follow Christ are to be built together spiritually into A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD. From the time of its conception, the early church also had to learn that the church was the people. And yet, this idea of a spiritual dwelling place does not arise from any talk of a physical building. Instead, the issue is raised because those from different groups who are called to be the church together have built walls of hostility between them.

Walls of hostility. We know all about them, don't we? We all have them, and they are all around us. Some of them we have erected ourselves; some have been built by others. We build walls to keep "them" away from "us." We build walls to make it clear who is "in" and who is "out." We build walls so that we don't have to see them or speak to them, so that we can pretend they don't even exist.

Growing up, I had to share a room with my sister. I remember a number of times when one or both of us would get angry at the other, so we divided the room

with masking tape on the floor to clearly indicate our own space and to have absolute power over that space.

For the church at Ephesus, the walls of hostility divided Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the Israelites and the foreigners, the chosen people and the strangers. But Paul pointed out that the Jews were also at one time without Christ, “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Neither group could claim superiority over the other. Their former identities of Jew or Greek were washed away, for now they were “one new humanity.” Now they were “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD.”

We have a beautiful building here at the corner of Broadway and Lorimier. Everyone who enters comments on it. The stained glass windows, the big, open atrium, the parlor with the marble floor, the upper room with views of the river, the historical character meticulously maintained to last for generations to come. The beauty and magnificence of this space is clearly for the glory of God.

And yet, Paul asserts that through the death of Christ and by the peace of Christ, we are to be a *spiritual dwelling place for God*. What does that mean? What does that look like for us? How do we go about making God feel welcome here? How will others know that the Spirit of God is present here? The four new members that we introduced earlier this month have witnessed to the warm and friendly welcome they received, so we are certainly on the right track.

The challenge is to maintain an attitude of warmth and welcome much like we maintain the building, and to extend the welcome outside as well as inside these walls. When we find cracks in the foundation; when the grime of the street makes its way to our windows, blocking the sunlight from shining through; when the walls of hostility begin to grow out of disagreements and competing priorities – the challenge is to address them. Every time we meet here for worship or education or

meetings, we need to be reconciled through the cross of Christ. Because we all know that the longer you ignore a leaking roof, the worse it gets.

Members of the household of God, the real beauty of this place is you. May we continue to be intentional and meticulous about breaking down any walls of hostility and joining together as a spiritual DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD... to the glory of God!

AMEN.