

“We are God’s Temple”
Psalm 126, I Corinthians 3: 9-17
4th Sunday in Lent/Good Bye Sunday
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When I think of South Church, I don’t think of its buildings. I don’t think of the Social Hall or my office or the smelly kitchen. Even though I spend almost as much time at the church as I do my own home, the memories and feelings I have about the church have little to do with the physical structure. You may feel the same way. We gather this morning to give thanks to God not for the church building, but for the amazing opportunities we have had to be the body of Christ within and beyond these four walls. When we share stories they almost always begin with “do you remember when so and so did thus and so...?” We remember how children responded to the minister during a baptism, a moving wedding ceremony, the way a choir anthem transported us into God’s presence or the joy we felt as we commissioned youth or adults to go into the mission field. The Spirit of the living God has transformed our lives in this place we call South Church.

Paul tells his brothers and sisters in Corinth the most fundamental element of church is its people. This early church was struggling to be the body of Christ in a changing and hostile world. He tells us the church will be the church whenever we respond to the Spirit of God. If we do not respond to this spirit, if we do not make a place for the Spirit to dwell within us there is no church. Paul says everyone is a temple, holy and precious to God. Together we make up the body of Christ, temples within and among other temples. What we do together, how we respond to God’s leading, how we treat each other, how we share our many gifts with the world; this is what makes us the church.

Paul taught the faithful in Corinth the true foundation upon which we build is our faith in Jesus Christ. It was their faith in Jesus Christ that would be the source of their true joy. When each person commits oneself to a deeper and more abiding life with Jesus, when we accept both the cost and joy of our discipleship, then all things are possible. The church is its people, not its structure. Each one of us is a sacred place in which the Holy One dwells. Together we make up the body of Christ and together, as faithful disciples, we comprise the church.

We may be sad to watch this sacred building come down. We will remember the joy and laughter that has infused every brick of this building. We will cherish every tear that has been shed, every life saving embrace, and every gracious smile. We will remember the long, life sustaining conversations we have had in the Fellowship Room, the alarmingly delicious smells that have emanated from the run down kitchen, or the hours you have spent preparing a classroom to begin another year as a church school teacher. Each brick tells a story, every room is the keeper of secrets. Those stories and those secrets don’t reside in the building. They dwell within each of us, the true temple that God has created and declared holy above all else.

We will continue to be the body of Christ with or without the church building. As long as the Spirit dwells among us, as long as it lives within each of us, we will be the church. What folks know about South Church has little to do with this building. People say, “Oh, South Church... you’re the folks that helped build the House of Abraham, or the ones that started the Inter-community mental health group, or the church where the high school kids love to go.” This church is responsive to God’s Spirit and alive to being the body of Christ in the world. The physical structure we see on the corner of Main and High Streets may deteriorate or fall apart and need replacing, but the church will remain strong whenever and wherever two or three gather in Christ’s name.

I think of the experiences I have had at Silver Lake. It is not the drafty cabins or leaky shower houses that make it special. We need places to gather for meals, to sleep, or to be refreshed with a brief warm shower after a long hard day of growing and playing. The physical structures have little to do with whether or not we are the body of Christ whenever we are there. I feel most strongly that we are the church in places where there is no physical structure; at the waterfront, on the ball field, in the amphitheater or at my favorite location, the Hubbell Chapel. That is where I have been touched by God’s spirit made known to me in the songs and stories and prayers and laughter of each person I meet.

That is how it will be for us. With or without a permanent building we will always be the church. As we share ministry with and receive hospitality from our friends at St. Luke’s Episcopal church we will learn that the body of Christ does not recognize denominations. As we find temporary office space above the Rockville Bank we will be grateful for good neighbors whose gracious spirit has made such transitional space possible. As we meet together in friends homes we will experience hospitality more deeply and will return to bless our new building with a profound sense of joy and gratitude.

The psalmist speaks the language of the farmer. It is fitting to honor our agricultural roots with this particular psalm. Our post-agricultural minds however, may not be familiar with such language. What we sow we will reap, but it takes time, it does not happen immediately. When you sow you release seeds into the soil where they must change in order to emerge in a new form. We believe that when our time in the wilderness, as we may come to call this transition, we will be a new creation. In the meantime, God invites us to let go of those things that keep us from receiving the gifts God has in store for us. When a farmer sows the seeds they are no longer in his hand. He casts them into the soil and trusts that God will take over from there. There will be rain and sunshine and plenty of time to see what will become of those seeds. If the conditions are favorable and the farmer is patient, there will be a harvest and much to celebrate.

We are like the farmer releasing ourselves from the past and into God’s hands. Along the way we will experience laughter and joy; true signs of hope. The future is out of our hands. Now we wait and pray, we trust and believe in the power of our awesome Creator to bring this new thing to life.

Lives have been transformed and made whole again not because of the color of paint on the walls or the style of couches in the rooms in which we gather. Lives have been transformed by the ways in which each of us has met Jesus in this place. Our lives have been made whole by someone who understood themselves to be God's temple, holy and special. Unless a church's foundation is Jesus Christ, there can be no substance, no power. It is like chaff, it will be consumed when the fire comes. If Jesus walks the halls, sits in the pews, and is in our classrooms, if Jesus dwells within us as we interpret the Bible and sing our hymns or preach our sermons, then we will know and do our mission effectively. If he is not the foundation of all that we do, no new building will make a difference.

God calls us then to sow the seeds of God's love in this time of transition, trusting that God will be present among us, wherever we gather, as the Spirit of hope and renewal and peace and love. The Spirit of the living God dwells within each of us, holy and blessed, and we will be the church, more vibrant and joyful than we have ever been! This we believe, may it be so! Amen