

The Home We Build Together
Exodus 25:1-9
November 10, 2019
First Presbyterian Church

Bible Readings

2The LORD said to Moses: ²Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. ³This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, ⁴blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, ⁵tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, ⁶oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing-oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁷onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece. ⁸And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. ⁹In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

1 Peter 2:4-10

4Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Sermon

Tell me, what three words

are at the heart of every parent's Christmas Eve nightmare?

"Some Assembly Required."

I really do not miss all those Christmas Eves

when after two or three candlelight services

I would get home after midnight and still have work to do.

Some Assembly Required.

Sounds like good slogan for Ikea...

that Swedish company known for their cheap meatballs

and furniture you put together yourself

with a tiny Allen wrench.

Of course, I'm sure nobody in this furniture town

actually shops there,
but you may know people who do.
I confess to buying a sectional sofa and a couple of dressers,
but for assembly, I always enlist the help
of middle-daughter, Emma...
who, unlike her Dad,
has a brain that is hard-wired to read Ikea directions
and loves to sit on the floor surrounded
by all those little brackets and screws and wooden pegs.
I man the Allen wrench...
and do what I'm told.
We make a good team...
and frankly, we enjoy the process
of building something together...
it's good for our relationship.

The same thing happens on a mission trip—
when a room is painted or ramp is built...
there's a sense of accomplishment over a finished job.
And not only that,
once your group has been together for a week,
other things start to happen.
Somehow in the passing cement buckets
or framing of a new wall;
somehow in repairing a hurricane damaged roof
or sorting through box of donated food;
when a group of people work on something together,
a community forms and bonds are strengthened.
And what WAS a collection of individuals
becomes a team as they work together
for a common purpose.

In his book (from which I lifted the title of this sermon),
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that in the Bible
the entire universe is created in a mere thirty-four verses. Really big universe -
just thirty-four verses.
But then, he writes,
there is this weird episode in the book of Exodus
that takes up an entire third of that book –
literally hundreds of verses with the instructions
for the building of the tabernacle.¹ Why is that?

¹¹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for the Moral Life* (Random House, 2019), p.286

As you may know, the tabernacle
was the portable sanctuary of the Israelites
during their wilderness wanderings.
The BUILDING instructions are laid out in Exodus 25-30
(that is six full chapters)...
and the account of the actual CONSTRUCTION
follows in Exodus 35-40 (again six full chapters).
We got to see an exact replica of this tabernacle
on our first day in Israel.
It was a rectangular enclosure out in the middle of the desert...
hung with curtains that were supported on poles.
The outer enclosure was 145 ft. long and 72 ft. wide...
roughly the size of this sanctuary
Inside of this outer enclosure was another tent building,
also set apart by curtains,
which was divided in two by a veil.
Behind the veil was the Holy of Holies
containing the ark of the covenant.
In front of the veil stood an altar of incense,
a seven-branched lampstand,
and the table for the Bread of the Presence.
In the courtyard outside of this inner building
stood an altar for burnt offerings
and place to wash and purify oneself
after performing the sacrifices.
Of course, the furnishings were made
of only the finest and costliest materials...
all cut and assembled according to exacting specifications.²

Knowing this, Rabbi Sacks asks:
Why should the building of this one structure
require so much attention
(when the creation of the world required so little)?

His answer?
Because the Israelites are not yet a people.
At this point – just freed from slavery in Egypt –
they are an oppressed and disparate group
of individuals and tribes.

Slavery does something to people...
and to turn THAT GROUP of individuals
into a covenantal nation, Sachs writes,
they must build something together.”

² Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper Collins Bible Dictionary (Harper Collins, 1996), p. 1087-1088

A people is made by making something, he says;
a nation is built by building together.
It has been said that in Exodus
where, as you know, the Israelites complain A LOT,
they are never happier
than when they are building something together...
than when they are building the tabernacle.³

Today is Commitment Sunday in our church...
and this story does connect in the sense
that God instructs Moses to take an offering
from those whose hearts are moved to give
for the building of a sanctuary.

But we had our “money sermon” two weeks ago...
so, what Heather and I want to do this morning
is make a connection between the Israelites
pooling their time, talent and treasure
for the purpose of building a tabernacle for God...
with how we (the members of First Presbyterian Church)
do the same for the purpose of building a church for Christ
on this corner Second St. and Third Ave. in Hickory.

Heather and I sat down this week and talked about this –
actually our entire staff talks about this a lot...
but Heather and I talked about what we think
we are working together to build here at FPC...
and we are both mentioning these three things
in our sermons this morning.

First, lest we forget...
we are working together to build a “place”
(literally a building) here in downtown Hickory.
Our goal is a building that is both beautiful and functional...
that is open and welcoming and accessible
to all people who would come here...
a building that serves both US and our community...
a building that continues to honor
the vision and commitment of those who gave us this place...
while also adapting to the needs
of our present and future ministry.
So, not only Sunday school and worship and Circle meetings,
but also a Warming Center for those
who otherwise would be exposed to bitter cold evenings...

³ Brooks, p. 287

a preschool that is respected throughout this community...
a very active bridge program (as in the card game)
for Catawba County seniors...
Sabbath Soup which offers a hot midday meal
when the Soup Kitchen is closed...
and the very important Networx ministry
which nests here every Monday evening.

We are working together –
pooling our time, talent, and treasure –
to build a place where all kinds of different people
can come to meet Christ in all kinds of different ways.

Second, we are working together to build a church
that seeks not only to be charitable, but transformational
through our mission and outreach.

that seeks not only a brief change in someone's circumstances,
but makes possible a lasting change in someone's life...

or to use an old Habitat saying,
a church that not only offers a hand out, but a hand up.

We know there will always be a place
for emergency financial and food assistance:
when folks need help with rent or utilities...
to get a prescription filled or have food to eat...
we try to offer it through Cooperative Christian Ministry
and our own Good Samaritan and Sabbath Soup ministries.

Yet, we have also realized
that the challenges our neighbors face
will not be met by charity only...
that those challenges are far deeper and more complex:
- generational poverty and substance abuse,
mental illness and lack of education,
physical and sexual abuse,
criminal convictions and incarceration,
bad decisions and more bad decisions...

as important as charity it is in the moment,
these are challenges couple of hundred dollars
toward a Duke Energy bill cannot begin to address.

So, we are trying first of all to change our mindset...
which is not as easy as it sounds.

And then, we are trying to change how we respond
by devoting our time, talent and treasure
to local transformational ministries such as
Habitat for Humanity, NETworX, Exodus Ministries,

and Safe Harbor to mention a few... and globally through scholarships and micro loans in Guatemala...

missionaries like John McCall

preparing pastors and other church leaders in Taiwan...

the Nkoma Hospital improving long-term health outcomes

and Ebenezer school preparing the next leaders of the nation of Malawi.

If there is one thing that is clear in the Gospels,

when people meet Christ,

he changes more than the immediate circumstances
of their lives...

he changes their lives.

And we are seeking to build together

a church that joins with Christ as he does this.

Finally, Heather and I see us building together

a community that offers an alternative

to the increasingly individualistic and divisive society
in which we live.

Together we are seeking to be a church

in which hard issues – OF which there are many –

and ON which people of faith do disagree –

in which hard issues are wrestled with in love and humility...
with honesty and hearts that agree to listen.

We want this to be a place

where you do not have to check your minds at the door

and where we will never tell you what to believe or think... but in which we can
together

tune our ears to Scripture and one another

to hear what God is calling us to believe and be and do.

In this community we seek to value

children, youth AND our older members –

not just as the future or the past of the church –

but as the church right now.

While trying to use modern tools to connect and communicate,

we are also trying to make this church

a “high-touch community” in a “high-tech world”.

Finally, we are seeking to build a community

which respects and honors our history and tradition

while remaining open to change and trying new things.

Well, this building project that we are undertaking here –

in all the ways we mean that –

facilities, ministries, education, outreach –

all the building we are doing takes time.

And it takes resources...

something we especially remember today.

David Brooks writes that

“When people come together to build something,
they make implied promises to one another.⁴

They promise that, if there is conflict,
they’ll stick together and work things out.

They promise to do their fair share...

or in some cases, maybe more than their fair share of the work. They promise to be in it
for the long haul

and to follow through on their intention
to build something together.

Well, we in the church have a word for that - “covenant” –
the free... mutual... commitment...

to build something together.

The thing is that in the church

we make these implicit promises explicit...

we take a commitment that is assumed to be true and sure,
and write it down on something called a “pledge card.”

Then we give thanks for what God has done...

we celebrate our commitments...

and then, we get back to work...

we get back to the work of together building a church.

Charge

Our passage from Exodus is God asking the people to give from their heart in order for the tabernacle to be built. Later on, chapters later, the people are so excited to build the text says, “that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed, ⁵and said to Moses, “The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do.” ⁶So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: “No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.” So the people were restrained from bringing; ⁷for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.” (Ex. 36:4-7)

The people came together, joyous to build God’s tabernacle. They reveled in a project, because in their working together they became a community. May this be so for us as together we seek to build this church for Christ.

⁴ Brooks again.