

Sunday, June 9th

Sermon Title: A House Not Made With Human Hands

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

I am going to date myself a little by mentioning a Christian artist, a songwriter who was born blind, only able to see shadows and light bouncing around vague objects. Maybe you have heard about him, or perhaps heard him perform at a church conference or assembly. I heard him perform at a regional assembly of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in the Southwest, and developed a liking for his style. His name is Ken Medema. His lyrics cover a wide variety of Christian theme, including justice, hunger, poverty, homelessness, charity. I remember him mainly for a song he wrote called “Come Build a Church.” The lyrics go like this:

“Come build a church with soul and spirit, come build a church of flesh and bone.

We need no tower rising skyward; no house of wood or glass or stone.

Come build a church with human frailty, come build a church of flesh and blood.

Jesus shall be its sure foundation. It shall be built by the hand of God.”

This Christian song, which I think of as a relatively modern hymn of the church, fits well with our scripture for today. “No wood or glass or stone, a church of flesh and blood.” In chapter 5, Paul mentions “a building not made with hands,” and “eternal in the heavens.” It is a theological image for us today as we consider a biblical theme related to what the ancients called a “tent of meeting,” what Marcus J. Borg calls a “thin place” (borrowed from earlier Celtic writers) where people can experience the holy, the divine presence of God, holy ground, a place where, in subtext, we humans might see God face-to-face (Dt. 34:10; Ex. 33:20-23) and perhaps be on a first-name basis (Ex.3:14).

Rabindranath Tagore (pronounced: Rabba’ in’ dranath Taygore), a Bengali poet, philosopher, and social reformer (1861-1941), in a poem entitled “Fireflies” penned these words: “While God waits for a temple to be built of love, people bring stones.” Of his poems, critics have written that he has a gift for painting the human soul. And so, with these words, he suggests that we humans often focus on material and superficial qualities rather than prioritizing love and compassion in our spiritual practices. When building a church, our soulful conversations still revolve around gathering stones. Within the confines of the Temple, during the week before he is crucified, Jesus quotes with authority (according to Matthew)

Psalm 118:22, “that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Is. 28:16; Mt 22:42; Acts 4:11). In the past, scholars have informed me that this stone that the builders rejected might easily be a keystone, instead of a cornerstone, that is the final wedge-shared stone that completes an archway, holding it together, rather than the first stone laid in the foundation of that structure. In this regard, it would not be a capstone which only decorates the top of the structure, but it might be a capstone in the sense of certifying the validity of the structure. Some translations of Heb. 12:2, include Jesus, not only as founder, pioneer, author, but also as “architect” of our faith, the one who has authored it and designed it. As a cornerstone, Jesus guides our compassion, as a keystone, Jesus completes our love, one for the other, As a capstone, Jesus verifies the quality of the love inside. So, it is with the design of our blueprints for the future congregation that we will become, a body of Christ guided by love, and perfected by compassion, and verified by grace, but also one that is composed of rejected stones that were originally tossed away as imperfectly suited for the task. We are stumbling blocks transformed by grace into the living stones of love.

The penultimate image in the Scriptures for the Body of Christ is that it is composed of “living stones.” It is a “Living Sanctuary” made our of “Living Stones,” where we are invited to taste the goodness of the Lord as “pure spiritual milk” by which our bones and bodies can grow in wholeness and health. As Living stones, our faith is filled with the fullness of God, the cosmic all-in-all, and our Lord Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts through that faith (Eph. 3:17-19). Just each of us form the living stones of God’s household, so too we form the sacraments offered inside God’s house, sacraments of holy hospitality. The relationships in God’s household are not suspicious, but hopeful, not distrustful, but faithful. When we welcome visitors at the beginning of our worship service, it is not an interruption to our routine, but a spiritual practice in our worship. It is not something we can choose to neglect, but something we must cultivate. Because God has an open heart, we too can open our hearts.

Imagine a holy place not made of stones, but of people. We might think that God would only live in larger-than-life, stately manors, or in magnificent mansions, or imposing castles. We might think that God can only live among the stars and galaxies of the heavens, sitting on a throne in the heaven of heavens. We might think that God could only live in complex, highly engineered, structures like the majestic Parthenon, each stone of which is measured and carved out to the square-root of five (5). We might think of the beautifully designed Crystal Cathedral in

California as a fitting place for God to dwell. However, what we overhear in the Good News of the day is that God chooses to dwell in a community of persons committed to living in peace, wherever that community meets to worship or fellowship. God dwells not in halls steeped in the habits of hatred, but archways spanning the surprises of love. When we are recreated as a community in Christ, we have passed from death to life, from sin to grace, from fear to servanthood to the good works that God has prepared beforehand for our way of life (Eph. 2:10).

Generally speaking, historically and theologically, we Disciples inherit from the Stone-Campbell Movement the idea that the church as we know it did not exist in the time of Jesus, or in the time of Paul, but many years afterward. Within this frontier heritage of the 1800s, our Sunday Schools taught out of something called a Christian Dispensational framework (John Nelson Darby), whereby the church was delivered as a gift of God to the people of God in a mystical fashion, “falling from heaven” so to speak, all of it as if made from the same cloth or fabric, during what was called the “Church Age” or the dispensation of grace. Over the years, it has been difficult to shed the influence of this Dispensationalism, even though we now think of the church as developing over a period of time, near and around, the first reference to the Papal See in Rome (314 CE), and the struggle for dominance among the various house-churches of the early Roman empire, the church in Rome becoming the most influential among very diverse worshippers across the empire, not at all looking as if made from the same cloth.

There is a strange reference to Antioch (ancient capital of Syria) as the place where the people of the Way were first called ‘Christians.’ (Acts 11:26) And, in another strange reference, in what is called is Last Farewell, Jesus refers to those who will one day become followers (Jn 17:20-26), possibly a future “church” that will gather in his name. Some of you may remember, from the books and sermons of Fred Craddock, a term called the overhearers of the gospel, those who could not go beyond the curtain at the front to participate actively in worship. In this connection, there is an odd reference in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian congregation concerning a “room” designated as “the room of the unlearned,” (1 Cor. 14:16) or a “room for the commoners, a room for the people coming off the streets,” if you will. How can we edify the average person who is uninstructed in how or why we worship, and how can help that one who is in the room of the uninstructed understand the words we say at the communion table, the words we use during worship, however excellent these words are, if those who overhear the gospel do

not know what we are saying? I can imagine these rooms in the ancient congregation at Corinth, overflowing with overhearers, elbow to elbow, struggling to get a closer look, wanting to know more. This is just one glimpse of what the ancients called worship, but a sobering one at that.

Continuing with the theme of building a church, I see reflected in the original language of the First Testament, three early forms of group worship, the roots of which develop into the ancient synagogue. For lack of a better way to describe these forms, I call them the “primordial entities” that laid the foundation for our later congregational gatherings, we know collectively as the church. They are 1) “witness – *edah*”, 2) “secrecy – *sud*”, and 3) “fellowship – *qahal*”). [(עדה), *edah*; (סוד) *sud*; and (קהל) *qahal*] In Ex 17:1, we see a reference to the “congregation of the children of Israel, the witnessing people, and *mowadah* evolves as a term used for the place of meeting, or the “door of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:30); The *sud* is a term that comes out of the Babylonian experience, where the people sat down in secrecy to take counsel (Ezek. 13:9, the assembly or council of my people, Ps.111:1 “wherever good people gather,” and Ps. 89:7 “the assembly of the holy ones.” Daniel is an outlier of this experience, where he would face west toward Jerusalem, not toward Mecca of course, but toward Jerusalem, to pray toward the Jewish Temple, a building to which Ezekiel gives wings to become a mobile Temple coming to join the people wherever they are located. And lastly, the *qahal* (Lev 16:33) where the congregation is gathered-together in assembly, the place of fellowship.” Then, there is also the group known as the “disciples (sons) of the prophets” (בני הנביאים) [“*Benai Nevi-im*”] mentioned in 2 Kings 2:7; 4:38, We do not know exactly how many there were, but one reference in the Bible suggests that there were more than fifty (50) [2 Kings 2:7], and at one point, they had increased in number to the point that they needed to build themselves a new place to live and study together. They are followers of first, Elijah, and then Elisha, and appear to be studying to become prophets in their own right, but likely not related to each other by blood, but more of a guild or band of disciples, and together their group was a sanctuary for the poor, and especially for debtors, and for people without status, taking advantage of an opportunity at new life. From these primordial entities comes an understanding of the church that is elliptical (based on two focal points, the scattered and gathered church), best described perhaps by a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “the fellowship of Christians is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kin[g]dom of God that any day may be taken away from us.” Part of the meaning of sanctuary is that there is an identifiable and visible place designated to

the public as a holy refuge or shelter; and yet there is another component we call “parish” (a term used by John Wesley), which is a ministry to *pariahs*, to the outcast ones and the rejected ones among us, to those outside the walls of any specific meeting place.

It was in the heart of King David to “build a house for the name of the Lord,” (1 Kings 8:17). Prior to King David’s dream to build a godly house, the place to worship God was in a “tent of meeting,” or as some called it a “tent of testimony or witness,” (Acts 7:44) It was a mobile home for God, if you will, so that God could travel with the people as they moved about from place to place, a holy place where God could dwell with them in their midst. As a holy place for testimony and witness, it was “holy ground,” or a place where people go to “get knowledge of something that will benefit them.” It was a place where one could find the Ark of the Covenant, inside of which was the Ten Words (or Commandments as we have called them) of God, the gift of God to the people to teach them the ways in which they should live in order to please God. It was also a place of confession and praise, both for individuals and for the community. As the tribes separated in the Promised Land, the people designated refuge cities where people might go for safety and high places, like Shiloh and Nob, where they might worship God locally. But now, David wanted to build a central house where God’s name would be honored for the entire nation. We can only guess as to why David wanted to do this so badly. Perhaps, he wanted to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem to house it more securely and keep it from being stolen again. The Ark was in some ways a symbol of the presence of God; the armies carried it into battle to consult it for a path to victory, but they found it to be as dangerous as it was helpful. In bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, David arranged a parade where he danced in front of the Ark as it was carried on poles into the city. But the rest of the story is that God did not allow David to build this house. That would be left to Solomon, but God did honor David for his dream, saying: “You did well that it was in your heart” to build a house for my Name. (1 Kings 8:17)

Both Jesus and Paul introduce the dream of a new house for God not made with human hands. You may remember the Easter promise of Jesus to his accusers: “tear down this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” (Mark 14:57-58; John 2:19-22) In these words, Jesus beautifully aligned the temple with his body. Many still misunderstood him to say that he would rebuild the temple in three days, a temple which had already taken forty-six (46) years to build; Jesus was dangerous,

to them just as the Ark had been dangerous, but Jesus was crossing the boundaries of language, as he so often did, for those who trusted him. The great buildings, the magnificent stones, that are the Temple will be toppled someday, but the Body of Christ will grow into a spiritual house not made by human hands. (Mark 13:2)

And Paul echoes this transition: “when our earthly tent is dismantled, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.” (2 Cor. 5:1) And Paul urges us to consider our very bodies as the “temple of the Holy Spirit within us,” saying “we are the temple of the living God, of which God says: “I will live with them and walk among them and I will be their God and they will be My people.” (2 Cor 6:16) The earthly temple is a “copy and a shadow,” not the original, based on a pattern that Moses saw on the mountain of Sinai, but the “true tent” he declares is in the heavens, and in our hearts. (Heb. 8:5; Acts 7:44). The prophet Zephaniah declares what God will do: “I will make you a name and a praise.” God will make a home in our hearts to honor the Name of Jesus!

We often think of God as an “old man in the sky,” “the Most-High ONE,” the “ancient of Days” as Daniel pictures God, sitting on a throne, his clothing as white as snow, his hair like pure wool.” (Dan 7:9,18) Moses speaks of God in terms of having a human form, walking on sapphire stone, or seeing God’s face or backside, and having a meal with God and the 70 elders. (Ex 24:9-11). Jesus simply tells his disciples that if they have seen him, they have also seen the Father; Jesus bears the likeness of God as do we who follow Jesus, but ours is a gradual morphing as we grow in spiritual maturity. So, it is natural that we should assume God has a human form, even though the prophet Isaiah warns us that, should we see the suffering servant we should most likely hide our faces from seeing One who “has no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” (Isaiah 53:1-3)

So, it is difficult to envision a God beyond this very human image, even though John ventures out beyond this image to describe God as “Love” itself. John tells us that when we dwell in love, we dwell in God and God dwells in us. (1 John 4:16) I do not know about you, but it always makes me a little anxious when someone talks philosophically about God. I would much rather picture in my mind’s eye a God that looks like I do, with arms and legs, and eyes and ears. But, that is what Paul does while he is in Athens; he describes God philosophically, as not being far from any one of us, so that we might grope after God, in some sense,

to find God as some type of Truth or understanding that liberates our Spirit and informs our Meaning, that “in God, we live and move and have our being.” (v.27/28) And, if you think about the name that God shares with Moses, it is a verb: “I am who I am,” “I am” is my name, I was, I am and I will be.” It has led some to describe God as “Being” Itself. But, Paul, surrounded by philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens, describes God philosophically as the One “in whom we live and move and have our being.” We might expect more from Paul, might we not, since, after all, he tells us that he was blinded by the shining face of the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road. But all we get is philosophy mixed with a big dose of sarcasm. “You Athenians look very religious to me.”

Paul quotes an ancient poet from Cilicia, named Aratus, on his visit to Mars Hill: “We are God’s offspring,” he announces. We are certainly not ready to hear Paul quote with authority something that is not Scripture, but he surprises us. This is what the Mars Hill experience is all about, springing surprises on those who visit, spending time all day long “telling or hearing something new,” like the Good News of the Gospel, for instance.

Paul proclaims newness on Mars Hill, quoting the poet Aratus: “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” (v.29) The image of God in our ‘living and moving’ faces (and our striving voices) is more like God than any idols we might create through our artistic imagination. We are the offspring of a living God, formed by the breath of almighty God. I find it very interesting that two people are actually named among those who believed Paul’s witness on that day, convinced by a philosophical argument about an unknown God, now made known through Jesus the Christ: Their names were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. Do you find it interesting that women were allowed on Mars Hill? Damaris must have been quite a woman to hold her own among the great thinkers on Mars Hill, maybe something of the personality that we find in Lydia of Thyatira. Lydia, a gospelized businesswoman, and now Damaris, a gospelized philosopher. The message: we can see more of God in the faces of other people than we can in frozen, stone images. Do you see something new is happening, something new springing forth from the lips of Paul, the living Word of God that is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” (Deut. 30:14; Rom. 10:8) turning the world upside down in the way that it thinks about God and the

universe.

“God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything...” (v.24)

Some listeners that day called Paul, in the Greek language, the “babbler,” the seed picker, a bird pecking the ground for random seeds. But Damaris and Dionysius knew immediately the implications of this great message. God offers life to us. We need God. God does not enable our addictions or demand our subservience. We need God’s love and forgiveness. Locks cannot hold God within or keep God out. When we look into the face of another and see God, we know the living word is true. And when we are reconciled one with another, we know God is at work in our hearts, filling the empty hole in our souls with the Easter grace of God. Amen!