

FIRST FOR THE FUTURE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 27, 2009

Scripture: Ezra 5:15-6:8; Mark 12:41-13:2

I don't know whether you caught it in the lessons for today, but there is in the Bible a certain ambivalence about the temple that recurs in Israel's history

It was David that first wanted to build a suitable temple to house God. But the problem was that God didn't want a house. "Are you one to build me a house?" God asked David, "I haven't lived in a house since my people came out of Egypt, and did I ask you for a house?"¹

It was finally in Solomon's time, that a Temple was built, and quite a temple it was. The Babylonians sacked it in 586 B.C. and took Israel into captivity. The exile lasted about fifty years, and when Israel was free to return to Jerusalem they wanted to rebuild the temple, which is where that Ezra passage comes in today. The nice part is that they didn't need a capital campaign. In a spending spree anticipating our own economic recovery program, Darius, king of Babylon, simply issued a decree that the costs of the temple would be paid out of the royal revenue, "the tribute of the Province Beyond the River."

The second temple lasted until the time of Jesus, but just before Jesus was born, about 20 B.C. Herod the Great renovated the temple significantly, enough so that it became known as Herod's Temple, which kind of spoiled things, and may have been one of the reasons that Jesus was a bit non-committal at his disciple's awe at the temple's stones. Finally in 70 A.D., the Romans destroyed the temple and sent Israel into a tailspin without a sanctuary or a sacred space to worship, and ever since Israel has gone to the Western Wall the last remnant of that temple, to pray for the day when the temple is restored.

It's probably a good thing that the Bible is ambivalent about temples made with human hands. Because God cannot be limited to one place, or one time, or one nation, or one temple for that matter... that's the larger truth that stands behind God's apparent indifference about having a house in which to dwell. God may not need a sacred house, but we need one; a place to gather, a place set aside for the soul and the heart to be still and know God present.

In the great tapestry that stands behind the altar at Ghent, there is an artistic expression of heaven. It's a scene reminiscent of Eden, and depicts the beauty of lush fruit trees and verdant landscape. There are animals, mythical and real, unicorns and lambs, and lions all living together in harmony and gathered about an altar which is located at the center of the tapestry. My architect friend, George Yu, points out, that there is no building, no temple, no stained glass windows or architecture to speak of in this

artist's idea of heaven. George Yu, who designs churches says, the good news of this tapestry is that there is a heaven, the bad news is there are evidently no architects.

Well for the past several years in this church, we have focused on our building, in fact all of our buildings, the temple which is the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York. We've studied the needs of the church, the groups and organizations that meet here, and the kind of ministry that we want to see continue in the years ahead.

We looked at the South Wing, and the Sanctuary, and the Mellin Macnab Building. And three successive committees chaired by Jon Cohen, and Myrle Wall, and finally Richard Rice and Eric Hilton, beginning with Jon Cohen's strategic committee seven years ago, began to paint a picture that told a story about a church that is one of the key and central places of life and faith in lower Manhattan.

This great old church, this Temple, is a place of witness and service, worship and vitality that helps the community thrive and that has been faithful in its work for nearly three hundred years now. All the way back to the time when a rebellious group of Sons of Liberty and their families staked a claim on worshipping God in freedom and in good conscience in the Presbyterian way. Those independent thinking, rebellious, patriots live on in today's free thinking and independent congregation. We are their rightful sons and daughters and their names are writ upon the stones of these walls to remind us that they are looking over our shoulders.

The three church committees of recent years saw that the congregation has done a good job of caring for the South Wing, with two renovation projects in recent memory to restore both the crumbling exterior of that architectural treasure, and the dated and worn out interior of the building as well. That South Wing is a hub of activity every day with our senior program the Caring Community where 75 seniors have lunch and social activities Monday through Friday. Art shows celebrate the gifts of artists there in the Great Hall. We worship there in the summer. We'll have lunch there today. And groups meet there all week long.

We have also been good to our sanctuary, restoring its interior, keeping it fresh and in good condition through a major facelift in recent years. The one building which is most heavily used, and shows the most wear is the Mellin Macnab Building. And due to a tight budget and because it is the youngest of the buildings, we have deferred maintenance on it for far too long.

About 500 people walk through its doors every day. Built in 1958 to much critical acclaim, it is reflective of its architect, Edgar Tafel's, distinctive eye. As Frank Lloyd Wright's trusted associate, Tafel gave us a building that has many of Wright's design features, using wood and brick, and earth tones, and soffits and indirect lighting to pleasing effect.

The building is the center of the church's daily activity. There are three schools that meet there. Our own church school on Sunday; but Monday through Friday there is

also our Nursery School with 105 children enrolled, and a public school for autistic children, PS226 with 36 children and 27 staff members each day.

In the afternoon, Alan's After School brings children from nearby PS 41 to a late afternoon program of supervised care and tutoring. Throughout the dinner hour and the evening, Twelve Step groups arrive, along with community groups, neighborhood associations, senior programs, condominium boards, all of whom meet here. By 9:30 in the evening ten homeless men have arrived to spend the night in the parlor, with two volunteers from the church staying with them. By 10:15 or so the lights are out, and at 5:30 in the morning the volunteers start making coffee for our ten guests, as a new dawn illuminates the city's skyline.

On Sundays about the time we're leaving for brunch or to take the kids to the baseball game, an Ethiopian Evangelical congregation gathers in the Assembly Hall for their worship service. Every spring two of New School's colleges hold their graduation exercises here. This time of year we are host to Congregation Ohel Ayala's services during the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Why even Wednesday afternoon, I saw a man with a prayer rug kneeling, then standing, then kneeling again, taking refuge in the church's garden saying his prayers in Arabic facing East toward Mecca. The church's doors swing wide outside and every entrance is a servant's entrance for the people of Greenwich Village

It's like this every day here. We're not just open on Sunday. And the activity and buzz and the wear on the Mellin Macnab Building has now caught up with us. After 50 years, the place is literally starting to burst open at the seams. All around the building you can see the ceiling tiles removed or replaced where pipes have burst and wiring has had to be replaced.

And it's not just age that's taking its toll, it's that we're also challenged by our success as a congregation, almost 1200 members now and still growing. I jokingly say that we're a bit like the old woman who lived in a shoe. We have so many children we don't know what to do. Churches all across the country would love to have this problem.

It's a great problem to have, but one that we cannot allow to continue to be a problem. We've run out of classroom space, we've run out of storage, the electrical system is so antiquated that we cannot run the air conditioner, the computer and the vacuum cleaner at the same time. The telephone system drops calls in the Hudson River somewhere. And the building has been grandfathered out of every kind of fire and life safety code for the past fifty years.

We are especially wasteful of energy and heat and electricity because we do not have thermal paned windows to keep in the warm air in winter and offset the outside temperatures. There are no thermometer gauges in the building and there are only two settings for the furnace, on and off. And the heating plant is so inefficient that the children and teachers wear sweaters and coats depending on the season to overcome the drafty windows. The first thing we're going to do is replace those windows next summer.

The Landmarks Commission has given their approval to allow that change and we need the immediate effect of that improvement to hold down costs in the annual budget.

We will also replace the air circulation system so that fresh air, and cooled air can be circulated in the spring and summer months. That will make it possible for PS226 to be full year residents rather than leaving the building during the summer. It will increase our rental revenue and no longer imposition the teachers and students who leave during the hot months of July and August.

With the planned renovations there will be better handicap accessibility, easier entrance doors so that parents won't have to struggle with strollers, nor people with walkers or wheelchairs either. The parlor will maintain the beautiful view of Fifth Avenue that it now offers. The grounds of the church will be preserved as green and leafy; the building will be environmentally more responsible.

We will spend less on maintenance and emergency repairs for a building whose plumbing and electricity and ventilation are worn out and already giving up.

I will be frank and tell you that while the lobby of the church will be more accommodating and light and airy, and the classrooms improved significantly with better lighting and open space that will serve the children better, and the playground on the roof will be refurbished, and there will be a dedicated choir rehearsal room for children... and more bathrooms even on the first floor, this is nonetheless not a frilly or extravagant renovation. There is much that we would have liked to have done to add space to the facility, but the committees planning this project felt responsible to be good stewards of the church's resources and respectful of the congregation's ability to support these renovations.

We may look like a church that has unlimited resources but no church has limitless financial resources and the committee planning improvements has been frugal in its approach, better utilizing every square inch of existing space rather than seeking to add space that would add to the burden of our annual budget.

The goal for this First for the Future campaign is \$15,000,000 a staggering amount of money for work that is primarily going to be hidden in the walls, in pipes and wiring and boiler and electrical fixtures, and windows and roofing. Not that the improvements won't be noticeable, they will be, but there will not be dramatic new architectural features to show for our gifts. There will be significant and noticeable improvements in such a way that future generations will be thankful that in this hour we were faithful in taking care of what needed to be done.

I am proud to say today that as of this moment the congregation has committed pledges of \$11.2 Million in support of that \$15M goal. That's 3 times the amount of money that has ever been raised before, and it is a measure of the commitment and generosity of almost three hundred people so far who have made pledges in support of the campaign. Their pledges range from seven figures to three figures. They represent not just pledges for one year, but for five years, so that everyone who has been invited to

date to participate has been asked to give prayerful consideration to a gift that would be paid over a five year period.

This remarkable accomplishment has taken place at the time of the worst economic recession in decades in this country, which is why these really are faith commitments. Faith in God, first of all, and made in thankfulness to God. Faith that over the five years, things are going to gradually improve and the commitments that people are making are ones they will fulfill sometimes sooner and sometimes later in that five year period. And faith in ourselves that together we can shape a future for the church that will happen as we commit to it.

Over and over again, people have told me that they are making a financial commitment to this project because they love this place, and because those who have gone before us have made sacrifices on our behalf so that this church could be here today. And now it's our turn to do for others what others have done for us in leaving us this great old church whose very stones stand as a witness to the love and grace of God.

What is your role in all of this? Well, first of all, I am going to ask everyone in the church, members and friends, to commit to prayerful support of this project. Whether you are able to make a financial commitment or not at this time, your prayers are essential to the work that we have undertaken. Secondly, I am asking you to consider making a gift that is sacrificial. We already ask all our members and friends to support the annual fund and budget of the church, so this is a commitment over and above that, so of course it is sacrificial. But in this case, I am actually asking that you consider a gift greater than any gift you have ever given before, a gift in the spirit of that widow's mite in the story today.

She gave all she had, her whole living. And while I am not asking you to give what you do not have, nor to commit to more than you can afford, I am asking everyone to make a pledge that represents a sacrifice, the definition of which you must decide.

I will tell you that a sacrificial gift cannot be measured in comparison to what others give, but can only be measured in terms of what you keep and what you give away, which is a penny can trump a thousand dollars anytime when it's all you have.

You may not be able to commit to anything in the way of financial support at this time. There will be some people who can't. And that is understandable. Perhaps you can simply promise at this time to give it prayerful consideration in the hope that eventually you can participate at a level that is possible even if it's only a few dollars a year.

I do want to share with you, however, a message that I received this week from a member who now lives away from New York and who made what I am sure for her is a sacrificial gift. She writes:

I would so love to be with First Presbyterian friends on Celebration Sunday... You are all to be praised for your work and the pledges which have been made for the First for the Future Campaign.

I am enclosing a check to be included with those gifts. My 88th birthday in July reminded me of my “years”, and I would like to be a part of this historic project.

Well, it doesn't get any more eloquent than that. She understands that sometimes there is a moment of historic significance and you just shouldn't let it pass. At whatever level you are able to participate I hope you will do so today.

If you've made a pledge, thank you. Perhaps, you have discovered you can do more. If, you haven't made a pledge, let me invite you to do so today. And if you cannot support this work with a financial gift, please support it with your encouragement and prayers.

When the work is done, I think you will be very proud that you have been a part of what God is doing and of what we will have accomplished together, for the strengthening of the mission and life of First Church. Soli deo Gloria, to God alone be the glory.

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¹ II Sam 7:4-6