

Reflection on the Word: July 22, 2018 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22

I'm going to begin our reflection for today with a story which many of you may know ... called An Afternoon in the Park.

There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God.

He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he loaded his backpack with Twinkies and a six-pack of lemonade and he started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he met a homeless woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his backpack.

He was about to take a drink from his lemonade when he noticed that the woman looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a lemonade. Once again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the homeless woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house, a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what, Mom? God is a woman, and she's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the woman, also radiant with joy, met up with another homeless friend on the street. The friend, stunned by the look of peace on her face, asked, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." And before her friend could say anything more, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Where do you look for God? Where does God reside for you?

The readings from 2 Samuel and Ephesians talk about building a dwelling place for God. But ultimately, not a house, or a temple in the sense of a walled, physical structure; rather a house, in the sense of a people, a community, that would experience God's steadfast love for all time.

King David wanted to build a structure – a house for the Ark of God. And, as it was the custom in those days to get the approval of the local "seer" or "holy one", he sought the approval of the prophet Nathan. Already certain that his

plan would meet with God's approval, David confides in Nathan who tells him to go ahead. After all, who would object to a temple?

The next day, however, Nathan has to go back to David and inform him that God has other ideas. God's message went something like this: "David, listen up! I've spent all these years dwelling in a tent, free to come and go as my people have come and gone, and now you want to confine me to one place. David, in all of my time with you folks, have I ever asked for a house to live in? You say you can't remember? That's because I haven't. Now David, I'll make a deal with you. Instead of a house of cedar for me, how about a house of people; your people who will also be MY people. One of your descendants, faithful to my promises, will rule the house of Israel forever."

That was God's message for David. It wasn't that God was ungrateful, but that God's vision was a different one. You see, for God, covenant is with people, not with buildings.

Over the years, I've come to a greater understanding of the relative unimportance and impermanence of buildings. I think of the days when as siblings, we were in the process of selling our family home, and moving our mother into a senior's apartment complex. True, there was a lot of emotional attachment to the house in which we had grown up – it was the house I'd lived in most of my life ... it was 'home' for me. But in the end, it was really only a building – the true sense of home was in the relationships I had with the people who loved me and with whom I'd shared that house. And those relationships were not destroyed with the selling of the building.

Likewise, the scripture today reminds us that God's "buildings" are covenantal and intangible, not physical structures but relationships marked by unity, peace, and love. Ours is truly a God who cannot be contained; a God without walls.

We can understand, though, David's wanting God to live in a nice temple ... After all, don't we take great care and pride in maintaining our church building as an esthetically pleasing and fitting place to worship God? Don't we, in the church, put a lot of value, time, energy, and resources into our buildings? That's not bad in and of itself, unless it ends up that the care and maintenance of our buildings becomes the focus of our mission, drawing our attention away from Jesus' call to discipleship in the world around us.

And then there are those times when we try to limit God's presence and activity to those structures we have built, missing much of what God is calling us to see and do and be, beyond those structures of buildings, administrative tasks, and ritual.

When I was visiting my cousin in BC a few years ago, we were walking around a neighborhood which was a new development, with many very huge houses. She was telling me that in a lot of cases, people had put all their financial resources into the building of the house and then had no money left to furnish it. So if you were to visit, there would be just the bare minimum of

furnishings, with many of the rooms absolutely empty. That's the situation with some congregations too – they have a big, expensive church building and the mortgage that goes with it. They've built God a house, but have nothing left, emotionally or financially, to put in it.

Or, as in a previous congregation I served, the church building was a beautiful, but huge, old structure and the church members were saddled with major expenses trying to heat and maintain the building. So much of their energy – so much of their money – went into keeping the place together. It's great to have these beautiful old buildings, but I've often wondered if some congregations are less like a church and more like a historical society.

We must never forget that God is far less interested in buildings than in relationship. God's plan was that through David's line, a house would be built with the lives of people; a people who allow God's presence to live in them, a people who build statues to God's greatness not with marble or stone, but with lives of love, kindness, generosity and faithfulness. Unfortunately, building an impressive temple is often a heck of a lot easier than becoming a holy people.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about the house of God being built on a foundation of the apostles and prophets, and with Christ himself as the cornerstone. He is not talking about bricks and mortar. For he says, "In Christ Jesus 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."

I am God's dwelling place. You are God's dwelling place. We, the church, are God's dwelling place! God's spirit lives in each of us! Wow!

And what does it mean to be knit together in Christ, and to be built up into a dwelling place for the Spirit of God? That's the task which is always before us as people of the church. We need to be always asking ourselves: How might I build a house within me where God can live?

It makes me think of a song often used with children ... I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together ... And the verse that goes: The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people!

God's home is found in US! It is in us, the people – in our words and actions, in our ministry and hospitality and outreach, in our compassion and caring – that all will truly come to understand what is the dwelling place of God.

So as you walk from this place, may you see the face of God in all whom you meet, and may all whom you meet see the face of God in you. Because the truth is that we impact our world not by the structures we build, but by the way we love! Amen.