

God's House and Home

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 26, 2018

I Kings 8:22-30, 41-42; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-59.

Yesterday a group from St. Thomas visited the Habitat for Humanity Global Village and Discovery Center in Americus to see the kinds of houses Habitat builds with people all over the world.

You probably know the remarkable story of Habitat for Humanity. Millard Fuller's life was spinning out of control. He had become a millionaire by age 29, but his family was falling apart. So he and his wife turned in a different direction. They sold everything they had and gave their money away. They settled in at Koinonia Farm in Americus. They got involved in a project called Koinonia Partners which built homes with people in Sumter County. They prayed. They studied the scriptures. They went to Zaire as missionaries to develop a similar housing partnership there. They realized what they had done at Koinonia could be done all over the world. So in 1976, they started Habitat for Humanity to build homes for all God's children. They got President Carter involved and the work took off from there.

Habitat for Humanity's vision is "A world where everyone has a decent place to live." Habitat works with families all over the world to build decent, affordable houses that fit the culture and needs of the community. Houses in the US are usually wood framed with shingle roofs. Houses in many African countries are built with fired clay or earth-cement bricks. The bricks are often made by the family as part of their investment in the project, their "sweat equity." Houses in Latin America are often built with concrete block or adobe walls and metal roofs. Houses in the Pacific are often built with wood frames and are constructed on stilts to protect the home from flooding.

Habitat for Humanity also supports home rehabilitation to help people stay in houses they already own. St. Thomas will work with a family in September on a rehab project through Habitat for Humanity of Columbus. To prepare for this project, for the next several weeks at St. Thomas we will think about housing and homes.

So it is timely that in today's lesson from I Kings, King Solomon built a house. Granted this house was more elaborate than a Habitat project and took longer to build. It was actually Solomon's second major building project. First, he built a palace for himself, which took 13 years. Then he spent 7 more years building the Temple, a house for God.

Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was quite a sight to see. It was three stories high, with a winding staircase to the second story. It was made of stone that was cut and finished at a quarry and then

transported to the construction site so the work would not be disturbed by too much sound. Everything inside the Temple was lined with wood so no stone was visible on the inside. Some of the wood was carved in relief, and most of the wood was overlaid with gold. Outside stood two bronze pillars 18 cubits high, or about 27 feet. The pillars were decorated with 200 carved pomegranates. Also outside was an enormous bronze basin called a sea, 10 cubits, or 15 feet wide. In addition, Solomon commissioned numerous bronze vessels, too many to count and weigh, plus a golden altar and lampstands.

The elaborate décor was appropriate. After all, this was a house for God. The scripture lesson we read was Solomon's prayer of dedication for this impressive, magnificent house.

All homes, from the simple to the elaborate, are important to us. The home where you grew up or brought home a new baby or laid a loved one to rest will have a great deal of sentimental value, and we may shed some tears when we move away. But in the end, a house is just a house. Those who suffer the terrible trauma of losing a house to a wildfire or tornado will often say in the interview with the TV crew who shows up, "You know, it's just a house. We'll be okay." The house is a container for the relationships and memories and love and lessons that grow within the walls. Losing a house sometimes reminds us of everything that is more important than even a house.

And after seven years of effort on this house, after finally completing this magnificent Temple, in the end as Solomon prayed, he recognized the same thing. The Temple, for all its glory, was just a house. The living God was so much bigger than the building. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

As Solomon prayed in this elaborate Temple, he realized God was so much greater than what he had built. God's glory fills the whole creation. All creation is God's dwelling place. The whole earth is not big enough to contain the living God, nor heaven or the highest heaven, much less the walls he had built. There is no place where God is absent.

Solomon had no way to know that we would someday travel beyond Earth to explore the heavens. He could not comprehend just how vast the universe is. We may not even know half of it today. But regardless of the discoveries that may await, Solomon's confession holds true. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you."

And in glimpsing and contemplating and marveling the vastness of the Holy, Solomon's own mind then turned to people made in God's image. He thought first of his own people. He asked that when the people of Israel prayed toward the Temple they would be heard by God. That makes sense. We expect him to pray like that for his family and community. But then his prayer moved beyond those closest to him. He prayed also in this way. "When a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you." Solomon asked God to do for the foreigner what he asked God to do for his neighbor.

I find the progression of Solomon's prayer pretty remarkable. First, Solomon built the Temple as a place to encounter God. Then he realized God was bigger than the Temple, bigger than Solomon imagined. So he moved outward to the people closest to him. But the majesty of God led him farther. When he realized the height and depth of God's being, when he envisioned the majesty of God overflowing the Temple and filling the heavens, he started to see holy connections among all people. He realized in this prayer that all people belong. All people have a place at the table. All people have a claim on divine attention. No one is beyond God's hearing or love. Solomon's prayer in the Temple led him to want for the foreigner what he wanted for his next of kin.

There would be times in history when the Temple would function to divide people rather than unite them. Religion does that still today at times. We sometimes use religion to set ourselves apart and focus on how we differ from others rather than how we are the same. But here in this moment of dedication, Solomon envisioned a place where God would hear the prayers of all. Solomon's vision of God was so big in this moment he realized there was room for everyone.

In an interview with Christian Ethics Today, Millard Fuller was asked, "How would you rank (1) raw energy, (2) off-the-charts drive, and (3) spiritual vision as contributing factors in your life work?" In light of his remarkable life and all that he had achieved for others, which was most important?

Fuller responded this way. "I would put spiritual vision as the primary contributing factor followed by drive and energy."

Spiritual vision led Fuller to envision a world where everyone has a decent place to life. Spiritual vision led Solomon to envision the Temple as a place of prayer for all people, where the prayers of a foreigner would be honored as highly as the prayers of his next of kin.

Where does our spiritual vision lead us? As we glimpse the majesty of God and the immensity of God's love in our prayers, or in this place, in the beauty of creation or in music or in the words of the scriptures, where does that spiritual vision lead us?

If we follow that vision long enough, it will probably lead us where King Solomon and Millard Fuller were led. Straight back to earth. Back to God's children down the street and far away. Back to God's creation in need of keeping and care. Back to this world, which is God's home.

God give us vision, plus a little drive and energy too.

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