

“A Dwelling Place for God”
Rev. Debra P. Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
July 19, 2015 Ordinary 16B

2 Samuel 7:1-14a Ephesians 2:17-22

Does this ever happen to you: you just start to feel that things are coming together and settling down for you, but instead of taking some time to rest, you get the urge to start some huge new project? Does that ever happen to you?

For the last few weeks we've been reading the story of David, from his call as a shepherd boy and his struggles with King Saul, to his anointing as king, and the celebratory parade to bring the holy Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Now things were settling down. The northern and southern kingdoms were finally united into one strong nation under David's popular and powerful rule. Israel's enemies had been expelled and were quiet, at least for now. And King David had built himself a beautiful house of cedar. So – what's next? Why not build a house for God, a magnificent temple for God to live in?

Pete read this morning that at first the prophet Nathan thought this was a great idea. He trusted David and didn't even bother to pray about it. But that night God spoke to Nathan and told him to stop this and tell David, Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I've never lived in a house. In all that time I moved about among the people of Israel, did I ever ask you, “why have you not built me a house of cedar?” One of your children will build me a house - later. But for now, I'm going to make *you* a house. And by that, God meant God was going to establish David's throne and kingdom through his family and line forever. It's not about what *David* could do for God. It's about what *God* can do through us to bless the world.

A building can be a burden and a distraction from God. We have a beautiful building here, and you all take excellent care of it. But it's easy to confuse caring for the building with serving God. To truly serve God, we have to bring the message of God's love outside these walls into our communities and the world. What we do with our faith is just as important as gathering in a building each Sunday for worship.

Still, it's good to have a building where we can gather for worship. It was wonderful to use our building yesterday. We hosted a memorial service for someone who had been a member of the Holy Spirit Lutheran Church. That church closed last year, so we provided space for them here; and not only space, but we also provided hospitality. Susan tells me there were 240 people in the sanctuary, and spilling out into this room. And many of them were touched by the love and care we were able to show.

Besides providing space for worship and hospitality, it helps to have a building people can see, a space to identify who we are to those who know nothing about different denominations. If you say, “I belong to the Presbyterian Church,” most people won't

know what you're talking about. But if you say, "we're the church with the sign on Fort Lee Road," they will.

Having our own space also provides some stability. I have a theory, and I don't know if it's true, but I think one of the reasons that small Korean churches come and go so quickly is because they don't have their own space to call home. Their identity tends to be wrapped up in a pastor rather than a building. And when there's a problem or conflict, or the pastor leaves for some reason, then the church is more likely to fall apart, because they don't have something beyond the conflict to remind them of their history together.

But *God* doesn't need the space. *People* do. And people are what God's house is really about.

We read this morning from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, that we are members of the household of God. The household of God is a spiritual house made of people, and built on the prophets and apostles. Their lives and teachings are the foundation. And Jesus Christ himself is the cornerstone, the basis of everything. And this whole structure of people, which we are part of, is the holy temple of the Lord, the place where God dwells. God's dwelling place is God's people. God lives in us, in our hearts, in our minds, in our voices, in our hands and feet, and the things we do together and on our own, where ever we may be.

I saw God here yesterday, in those of you who came to help host the memorial service. You cleaned on Friday, set up, directed cars, ushered, prepared and served food, washed dishes, swept, emptied garbage, and then arranged chairs and set up again for worship today, all with cheerful good will. Several people thanked me for hosting and said they might come back on a Sunday. Whether or not they actually come back on a Sunday, they saw something here they want to see more of. Could it be God?

And Doris, the wife of the man we memorialized, told me she felt overwhelmed with love. And she asked me whether it was OK to feel joyful at a time like this. Yes, you can. Death can bring some blessings along with the grief, when people come together and express their love, and God's love. I know it wasn't *just* us; it was all the people who were here sharing their love. But you were a big part of it, working together to bring God's presence and blessings to a family in their time of grief.

God was dwelling in you last week when you volunteered at Paterson Habitat for Humanity. I wasn't up for such strenuous work this year, so I stayed home. But I hear everyone worked hard. Hyung told me that on Friday the Habitat staff gave Joe VanDeWeert a nickname of "That crazy Dutch Guy." And on Saturday they named Jason Lee "That crazy Korean Guy," because both of them threw themselves into digging holes and hauling dirt with extraordinary enthusiasm and strength. God found a home in all of you.

I see God dwelling in our Sunday School teachers who find joy in playing, teaching and guiding our children in the faith. I see God in our singing, praying and listening, and in every person who opens his or her heart to the Lord. We are not just the church building on Fort Lee Road. We are also the church that provides English conversation classes and welcomes immigrants to our community. We are the church that provides a house so that victims of domestic violence can have a home to live in while they transition to a life of independence. We are the church that hosts CoFiA, supporting their work with day laborers and helping victims of wage theft. We are one of the churches that cooks and stays overnight with the Family Promise Homeless shelter. We are the church that celebrates Gay Pride Sunday, and welcomes all people. We are the household of God, God's temple and God lives in each one of us.

Our Presbytery has a new worshipping community based at the United Presbyterian Church in Paterson. One member of the church felt God calling her to reach out to the people who hung out on the street behind the church, many of whom are prostitutes, drug addicts and alcoholics. So she picked a date and she went out and personally invited each one of them to come to worship that day. The date was June 27 last year. When June 27 came, she waited eagerly, but not one of them came into the building. Later, in walking prayerfully through the neighborhood, she noticed the same people at a Chinese restaurant, where the biggest seller on the menu was chicken wings. And she got an idea. They would bring the church to the street.

The woman's name is Diane Anderson, and she worked with her pastor, Anna Sweringen Taylor, and they gathered together a team of six. They prayed together and set up a night they call "Wings and a Prayer." Come and get free chicken wings and we'll pray with you, about whatever you want, without judgment or lectures. At first people came for the wings. But some of them also asked for prayers. And now some people come just for the prayer, out there on the street, every Thursday evening at 6. Often over 100 people show up over the course of an evening. Standing around on the street, people share their pain and struggles and ask for God's mercy and help. The volunteers wear T-shirts that say "Faith Works" on the front. On the back it says, "Don't just go to church. Be the church." That's where God dwells, in the broken lives of those who come for prayer and in their testimony that faith does work. And God dwells in the people who are willing to risk not just going *to* church, but being the church, build on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Today we gather at the table of our Lord. At this table, we bind ourselves to Jesus, and to all he represents: integrity, truth, mercy, forgiveness and love. We take him into ourselves and his spirit renews us, feeds us, and sends us out to offer God's love to each other and the world. May we open our hearts at this table, that God may find a spacious dwelling place and may we carry God with us as we leave this place, loving our neighbors as God loves us. In Jesus' name, Amen.