

“You Are God’s Temple”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
February 23, 2014 Ordinary 7A

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Linda read from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians this morning, “Do you not know that *you* are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in *you*?”

What does it mean to say that *we* are God’s temple, and that God’s spirit dwells in *us*? Paul wrote this letter in the middle of the first century when the temple was a magnificent building in Jerusalem, and central to the lives of the Jewish people. This temple contained an innermost room called the “Holy of Holies” which according to the Jewish faith held the very presence of God. It was God’s dwelling place on earth. The Holy of Holies was covered by a curtain and no one was allowed in except the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement, to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. But Paul told the Corinthians, *you* are God’s temple. God is not confined to a building. The Holy of Holies is inside you. You are carrying God.

Now this idea was not completely new. Last week in the beginner Bible study we read the story of Jesus’ baptism according to Mark. And it said that just as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove (Mk. 1:10). According to the gospel of Mark, God entered Jesus at his baptism and stayed with him as he walked through life teaching and preaching and doing good. When the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, he spoke of his own body as a temple and said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” (Jn. 2:19) The Pharisees, of course, had no idea what he was talking about.

According to Mark, at the same moment Jesus died on the cross, “the curtain of the temple (that covered the Holy of Holies) was torn in two from top to bottom,” (Mk. 15:38). Whether or not you take this literally, there’s a powerful message here. God was now accessible to all people, not just the high priest once a year. And the story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) tells how God’s spirit came and filled the disciples who were gathered for worship after Jesus had died. God’s spirit is in us, and we are God’s temple, just as Jesus was.

In chapter 6 of this letter to the Corinthians (v.15) Paul wrote, “Do you not know that *your body* is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God...?” This is not just a spiritual thing. We carry God *in our bodies*, our physical existence. And therefore we need to honor our bodies. Do you treat your body with kindness and care? Or do you treat your body as a nuisance to be neglected, ignored or abused?

In this particular chapter Paul was talking about sexual morality. The city of Corinth was known back then for pagan cults that used prostitution as part of their religious rituals. And the local people had a reputation for shameless loose living. Paul was telling them, what you do with your body matters. If the Holy of Holies is in your

body, you need to treat it with care and respect. Don't let other people degrade or abuse your body. It is sacred, set apart for God.

Again, this was not an entirely new idea. The creation story in Genesis 1 (v.27) teaches that all people are created in the image of God, male *and* female, all in God's image. And it also says, (v.30) "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." People are created in God's image, everything God created is good, and God's spirit lives in us. We're not supposed to worship our bodies, but we are to honor them as we would honor anything that belongs to God. And we need to recognize and honor God's image and presence in all human bodies, no matter what race or nationality, age, ability, sex or sexual orientation.

In the book Practicing Our Faith, which I am hoping you will all read and discuss during Lent this year, Dorothy Bass points out that people tend to idealize some bodies, certain types of bodies we consider strong or beautiful, and pay exaggerated attention to them. And we shun other bodies as ugly or unworthy of our attention and care. But if we honor all bodies as carrying God's presence in the world, we will care about everyone. And we will also care about the larger social, political and environmental issues that affect people's bodies. Are we going to let a body that carries God's presence live next to a toxic waste dump? Can we sit by and watch someone who houses God's spirit work in unsafe conditions, or go homeless or hungry? All people are made in God's image, so we need to treat them as holy. They carry God's image and presence.

David read from the book of Leviticus this morning, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Many people think the word holy means pure or perfect, unstained by sin. And most people don't really want to be holy, because it doesn't sound like much fun. Who wants to be overly good? But "holy" is a word used to describe everything about God's nature – the energy, the mystery, the power, as well as God's righteousness. "Holy" is a word that contains all the characteristics of God. And when we describe people or things as holy, it simply means dedicated to God, set apart for God's use, or for a relationship with God. Any sense of holiness that we might have comes from God's holiness, not our own.

The book of Leviticus calls on God's people to practice a certain way of life, not because it will necessarily benefit them, make them more healthy or prosperous, but simply because it is good. The laws of God are based in the character and nature of God. "You will be holy, for I am holy."

According to the passage in Leviticus David read today, that includes quite a bit of social justice, from fields and farms to finances and courts. Leviticus calls on God's people not to take everything for themselves, but to leave some for those who are vulnerable. God's people are to deal honestly and fairly with others, including day laborers, the poor, the blind and the deaf. They are not to hate family members or hold a grudge. And finally, it is all summed up with love: "Love your neighbor as yourself." I bet you thought Jesus made that up. But he was just quoting from the book of Leviticus.

Now I neglected to mention one little thing about Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 6 Paul wrote "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you..." Paul was addressing individuals in the church. Each person was a temple of the Holy Spirit. But in the passage Linda read from chapter 3, the "you" is plural. Paul was addressing them as a church. "Do you not know that you (all of you together) are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you (the church)?"

That adds a lot to the story because Paul was writing to a church in conflict and turmoil. They were arguing about leadership and authority. And they were divided over questions of sexual morality, marriage, and riotous behavior. Different leaders were criticizing each other, and people were hauling each other into court. Sound familiar? I know at least a few denominations that are struggling with similar divisions, including our own. But Paul reminded the church that it wasn't all up to the leaders. The church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and each member is part of the temple God dwells in. We each practice our faith, building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and we do it together.

Christianity is not a private matter, or something we practice in isolation. And it is not something we can watch from the sidelines. That's why I am inviting you to read the book Practicing Our Faith this year, and reflect together on the different practices. It's not that this book has all the answers on how to carry God's spirit in the world. But it will open up conversations, helping us discover new ways to practice our faith with integrity and generosity, so that together we may learn and grow and reflect God's holiness in our lives.

For example, how does someone who is the temple of the Holy Spirit, someone who carries God within them, express welcome to others? How do you practice forgiveness in a particular situation? How can your family learn to say yes to the things that are most important? What do you spend your money on? Do you know someone who has died well? How can we help each other when it comes our time? What are your favorite songs, and what do they say about you? If we carry God's presence with us, all the things we do in life have the potential to shine God's light into the world.

Maybe some of you might not like to think of yourselves as holy. I've heard at least one of you joking that you're not holy enough to do this or that. But this has nothing to do with how good we are, or how hard we try. God has no perfect vessels to carry God's presence in the world, only real human beings. What makes us holy is not our own goodness or perfection, but simply the fact that God's spirit dwells in us. You are here today, and you are part of God's temple in the world. God's spirit lives in you.

So may we honor God's spirit in each one of us, and support and encourage each other as we carry God's holiness in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.