

## **“God’s Building”**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 20, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 3: 10-17

<sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. <sup>14</sup> If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

### Sermon

#### **God’s Building**

Paul, in his letters to his young churches,  
loved to develop some metaphor  
in order to illuminate the mystery of life in Christ.  
That is what “metaphor” literally means: to shed light.<sup>1</sup>

[Something like the bumper sticker I saw the other day: “*Metaphors be with you!*”]

A metaphor casts new light on an otherwise abstract idea.  
In today’s passages,  
Paul uses construction metaphors to illuminate the mystery of life in Christ.

Paul relates his work to a skilled master builder, an architect.  
Paul is the planner of the building someone else will build.  
Once the foundation is laid, no one else can change the foundation of the building.<sup>2</sup>  
Paul says “that foundation is Jesus Christ.”  
The life and teachings of Christ are the bedrock of the church.  
Build God’s temple on a solid foundation of Christ’s love and mercy,

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, “Pulpit Resource” Vol. 39, No. 1, Pages 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and hopefully, prayerfully, faithfully  
it will stand the challenges of time and trials, tragedy and temptation,  
and throughout its days the church will give glory to God.

Continuing with his metaphor, continuing to shed light on the mystery of life in Christ,  
the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, asking,  
*“Do you not know that you are God’s temple  
and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”*

This morning we are going to unpack this passage of Holy Scripture.  
Allow me to say that it would be simpler if Paul was a Southerner.

You see, when Paul asked the church in Corinth the question,  
*“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”*  
he was using the verb and second person pronoun in the question.  
In other words, the “you” he used three times in one sentence is plural;  
which brings us to his heritage.

If Paul was a true southerner,  
if he liked his tea sweet and his sauce hot,  
if he preferred his NASCAR fast, his grits slow, his music country,  
and his football on Friday night and Saturday afternoon,  
then he would have asked the church,

*“Do y’all not know that y’all are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in y’all?”*

And we would have understood.

We’d get it.

We would understand

that he was talking to us, one and all, in the same breath.

We would grasp

that he was a church member addressing his beloved community of faith.

We would take to heart

that the Spirit of God dwells, lives, breathes, has its meaning  
and has taken up residence and given significance  
in this here church.

### **God’s Building**

God’s temple is holy.

God’s temple is purified by the fires and frictions of life and love.

While in seminary there was something about my social ethics teacher  
Professor Roger Shinn that I really liked,  
but could never put my finger on it.

What was it about his presence that moved me,  
made me appreciate him so, look forward to being with him?  
What in his demeanor allowed me to sense his holiness?

One day a classmate named Alexandra Coe  
was talking about Professor Shinn and she said, "*His corners are honed.*"  
Thanks, Alex.  
Yes, Professor Shinn's corners were honed; he had no sharp edges,  
his life had been shaped and smoothed over the years by challenges and grace,  
making him equally judicious and compassionate.  
When students were in Dr. Shinn's classroom  
they knew intuitively that they were in the presence of one  
who was purified by God.  
Surely in this man there lived the temple of God.  
His holiness shown through.

### **God's Building**

What was it about this simple, unadorned architecture that moves us,  
makes us appreciate God so, engages us to look forward to being here?  
What is it about this hallowed ground that allows us to sense holiness?  
When you are here in this sacred space and holy place,  
here in this temple of Christian teaching and living and communing,  
you know – y'all know! – that we are in the presence of purification.  
The church's corners are honed,  
rubbed smooth by the challenges and graces  
we have encountered and overcome, with the help of God.  
If I may be so bold as to repeat for you  
what our neighbors say about First Christian Church of Decatur,  
it is that our holiness shines through.

Holiness shows – people can tell.

It is not a coincidence that we have been asked to take the point  
for the city of Decatur's faith communities and secular organizations  
in planning the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9-11 this September.  
It is no small thing that our practice of Christian hospitality by building  
a church and community playground has changed the urban landscape.  
It is typical in the life and love of this congregation that you and you and you  
are engaged in the daily practice of ministry,  
that this building of God is shining bright  
in and through you and you and you  
everywhere and anywhere you go.  
It is not surprising in the least,  
for God's temple is holy, and y'all are that temple.

### **God's Building**

Y'all are the temple of God.  
Our foundation is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.  
Please, when you hear these words of affirmation and formation,  
please do not become anxious or afraid.  
Do not think that you have to know everything there is to know about Jesus

in order to let him be your spiritual foundation,  
because it's never too early or and it's never too late  
to welcome home the love of Christ into your heart and soul.  
Please do not imagine this as yet another burden to bear!  
Christ isn't tacking on anything else to your already full agenda,  
your too-long laundry list of responsibilities and tasks and work and play.  
Rather Christ is inviting us to integrate our spirituality into our work,  
and to weave our work with spirituality.  
Blend into the mixture of your daily life  
the yeast of the Spirit of God,  
allowing its generous activity to ferment and expand and grow  
in your plans and projects, proposals and programs,  
parenting and care giving, studying and learning  
and then wait and see what holiness transpires.

### **God's Building**

This passage invites us to consider with joy and sincerity  
three implications of being God's temple.

#### **First, if you can do it by yourself, it won't be very big.**

If the temple you are building is only built by you,  
then accept right now that its reach will be short and impact short-lived.  
If you think you don't need anyone else,  
then you are missing the point of God's building.  
*"The church is all of us,"* said Oscar Romero  
We need each other, including the total, amazing diversity of God's creation.  
We need each other, including the immigrant and the alien,  
the lost, the last and the least, the unloved and those who feel unlovable.  
Unity and teamwork are essential components of building anything of value.  
All ministry is relational; building relationships are the key to building God's temple.  
So, what are the things you need help from others to sustain your building?  
What do you bring to the table that others can use and benefit from?  
The unifying factor in temple building is Jesus Christ.

#### **Further, if what you are about does not continue after you are gone, it was not very important in the first place.**

After you are gone, after we are no longer on this blue planet spinning in the sky,  
will what you are doing, being, and sharing survive? Will it thrive?  
What will be your living legacy?  
When you are not still here to defend it,  
will your work and play continue to stand and deliver?  
What steps do you need to start taking to ensure that the love you hold fast will last?  
The determining factor is Jesus Christ.  
Build your foundation on Christ.  
By any chance do you recall God saying to us,  
*"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"* (Matt. 17:5)

Listen to him. Trust him.  
Trust that the Word of God does not return unfulfilled.  
Trust in the Holy Spirit to guide and direct you  
to build a holy temple that will add depth and breadth  
for generations to come.

**Finally, if what you are building  
is not built on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ,  
then it may not be holy.**

Paul was writing to his beloved church in Corinth,  
a congregation embroiled in turmoil.  
Jewish Christians believed one way, and Gentile Christians thought another way.  
People were arguing, "*I belong to Paul,*" or "*I belong to Apollos,*"  
or "*I belong to Cephas,*" or "*I belong to Christ.*" (1 Cor. 1: 12)  
Let's face the facts: folks today aren't any different than we were 20 or 200 or 2,000 years ago.  
So many churches get caught up in tensions and divisions and self-righteousness.  
Churches are kind of like cats.  
With all that hissing and scratching and yowling,  
we think they are fighting but really they are multiplying.

Well, all this spitting and splitting and dividing and going our separate ways  
over pettiness and wedge-issues  
has damaged the walls and foundation of the church.  
There is nothing more oft-putting to the world than fussy people of faith.  
That and fundamentalism.  
Are you like me, finding it most difficult to discern anything holy  
about religious fundamentalism, whether its Islamic, Jewish, Christian, or any religion?  
Jim Wallis put it this way,  
when he pointed out that today's prevailing attitude is "*I'm right and you're evil.*"  
It is high time for this temple of God to stand up and refuse to allow  
hard-hearted, narrow-minded, unimaginative,  
judgmental, sexist, gay-bashing, immigrant-blaming  
so-called church leaders to speak for us!  
Honestly, I do not know the God they speak of.  
The God y'all know loves kindness and mercy, is slow to anger and quick to forgive.  
The God y'all love is the one  
who picked you up when you were down  
and then showed you how to do the same for one another.  
I don't recall Jesus telling me to pull up the drawbridge after I was across. Do you?

### **God's Building**

Build your temple on the nature and nurture of Jesus Christ.  
Jesus Christ offers to the world a new way to be and share the Good News.  
Be holy.  
Be the temple of God.

Be a welcoming sight for the outcast and cast off.  
Be a living witness of the power of reconciliation and redemption.

Will God's building stand the test of time?

The trials of challenges and conflicts?

The temptation to be small-minded or self-centered?

What will be our living legacy?

Do you believe it will survive and thrive?

Do you believe?

The sustaining factor is Jesus Christ.

The love of God purifies the faith we embody...

...for if it is holy, if it is of God, if it is for God,  
then it will be, forever and ever.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*