

“Holy Places”

a sermon by

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Text: “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (Matthew 6:21).

Several weeks ago, when I was on study leave in Princeton, I came across a small book by Reynolds Price entitled *Letter to a Godchild: Concerning Faith*. In this book addressed to his godchild, Price speaks of his own experience with faith and how his faith has shaped his life.

In this letter he speaks of some of the great books that shaped his own thinking: the stories of the Bible; George Bernanos’ *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Graham Greene’s *the Heart of the Matter* and *The Power and the Glory*, and other writers such as Walker Percy and John Updike.

Price speaks as well of some of the music that has shaped his journey of faith including the B Minor Mass of J. S. Bach, Handel’s *Messiah*, and the words of Beethoven, Schubert and Verdi.

In this letter to his godchild Price also relates some of the places in his life that contributed to his faith. Bernini’s high altar in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Wells Cathedral in England, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as well as the Grand Canyon and the Taj Mahal.

I.

I imagine that all of us have those “holy places” in our lives. There are places—some religious—some not—that in many ways shape not only the kind of persons we are, but also the kind of faith that characterizes our lives.

That is certainly true in my life. Like Reynolds Price, I have stood in awe in some of the beautiful cathedrals of the world: St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Brunelleschi’s great church of

San Lorenzo in Florence, the majestic St. Paul's Cathedral in London. But there have been other places as well—beautiful cities and countryside that are indelibly etched in my mind. There are many of us who are drawn to the ocean or beaches as great places of beauty. Paul Tillich once found the ocean shore to be a powerful symbol of the infinite and finite. There is something powerfully moving about the ocean that reminds us of the vastness and power of the creator.

II.

In the passage of Scripture from which we have read today, Paul speaks of the church, not in terms of a place, but of people. He uses three metaphors to make this point. The first concerns leadership (verses 5-9). The church at Corinth was divided into factions that represented the former leadership of the church. There was a group that held allegiance to St. Peter, another to a brilliant orator named Apollos, another which was loyal to Paul. There was even a "Christ" party that no doubted thought they were above all the rest. Paul reminds his hearers that all of God's workers in the church, be they ordained or laypersons, are workers.

The second metaphor that Paul employs is to say to the church at Corinth that they are "God's building" (vs. 10-15). He compares himself to the master builder and notes that when he was starting the church in Corinth, he was like a contractor or builder completing a work. For Paul the foundation of the building is Jesus Christ, or specifically, Jesus Christ crucified. He is the foundation, which cannot be changed.

The third metaphor is a development of the second. It reminds them that they are not only a building; they are the temple of God. It is hard for us to fully understand how radical these words that Paul wrote were. For the Jewish people the Temple in Jerusalem was the place where God dwelt. King David had established Jerusalem as the political capital of the Israelite Kingdom. Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. It contained the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies. The Jews believed that God's presence was in that Temple.

Now Paul is saying something very different. He is saying that the Church has now replaced the Temple in Jerusalem. He believes that the Spirit of God is present in the community and the community is now the place where praise and worship are offered to God. The Spirit of God can no longer be localized in a sacred building. It is to be found in the gathered community of God's elect people in Christ.

So this morning I want to say two things to you.

III.

The first is this. The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ and everything else is secondary to this. Paul says this quite explicitly to the church in Corinth: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." (I Corinthians 3:11)

Several years ago I visited the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, home to one of the greatest intellectual centers in the world. In the Age of Pericles, Athens was the intellectual center of the entire Western world. Socrates walked the streets of Athens, as did Plato and the great tragedians

of Greek literature. As we stood there on the Acropolis admiring some of the great structures such as the Parthenon and others as well, our guide pointed us to a famous spot a few hundred yards away. It was “Mars Hill,” the place where Paul delivered his great sermon to the men of Athens. The Book of Acts describes Paul’s visit to Athens. He was distressed to see that the city was filled with idols (Acts 17). He spoke to the men of Athens about an unknown God and about this Jesus who died and who was raised from the dead.

When I was in Athens, I wondered to myself whatever happened to the church in Athens. In the New Testament there is a letter to the church at Rome, to the church at Ephesus, to the church in Corinth and Philippi, but no letter to the church at Athens. I couldn’t help but wonder if Paul’s efforts there really were very effective and I could not help but think that when Paul left Athens to go to Corinth, he changed his message. Listen to what he said: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified (I Corinthians 2:2)

One of the great members of this church was a man by the name of C. C. Beam. He was the Executive Secretary of this church from 1919-1923 and also served as the Executive Secretary of Presbyterian Hospital. Before Mr. Beam died in 1950, he wrote in his last will and Testament that the entire income from his estate be used “for the support of the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him Crucified as the Only Means of Salvation, as the said preaching shall be provided or designated by the Session or the governing body of the First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, North Carolina.”

As we come to Dedication Sunday this next week, there is nothing more important than holding the centrality of Jesus Christ as the one imperative that defines this church and its mission.

IV.

The second thing I want to say this morning is that the mission of the church is to bear witness to God’s love for the whole world in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament Lesson this morning is one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament, the famous Temple Sermon of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7:1-15). In this sermon the great prophet stands at the door of the Temple and says to those who have gathered for worship, “Do not trust in these deceptive words: This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” (Jeremiah 7:4)

This sermon is one of the most powerful texts that warns the people of God what happens when the words of their mouths do not match the actions of their lives. Jeremiah warns them that God will dwell with them, if they do not oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow or shed innocent blood. But if they do not act with justice, if they steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, and make offerings to other Gods, then God will abandon them and the Temple in Jerusalem will no longer be the place where God dwells.

This summer I had the opportunity to speak to a group of children who were part of the Freedom School in this church. I asked them if they knew what this part of the building where we worship was called. One of them answered correctly that it was a sanctuary. When I asked them why it was called a “sanctuary,” one of them replied that it was because it was a “holy”

place. When I asked them another reason it was called a “sanctuary,” one of them replied that it was a “safe” place.

Surely, as we come to Dedication Sunday this past week, we all ought to give thanks to God for this beautiful sanctuary that has been given to us as a place of worship.

But as we come to Dedication Sunday, let us do something more than dedicate our pledges to God. Let us dedicate ourselves to insuring that the First Presbyterian Church is a “holy” place, whose foundation is Jesus Christ and that offers a place of safety to every member of our community.

Amen!