

The Second Sunday of Easter

1 Kings 8

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“Even heaven cannot contain you....”

A special day. Today we celebrate a remarkable accomplishment and an ongoing challenge. The accomplishment: today we will dedicate and rededicate buildings old and new. The challenge: to use these resources as a witness to Jesus Christ here in the heart of our city and to the ends of the earth. Today, we are thinking about buildings, and more than buildings.

This may come as no surprise to you, but I love churches. By that, I mean that I love church buildings, because they always reveal so much about the congregation that lives inside. I am amazed and grateful for the way in which we have been able to transform our facilities in the last seven years. But as we focus our attention today on what we have accomplished, we need to remember why Solomon prayed the prayer that he prayed at the dedication of the temple.

I love church buildings. I love to visit the great cathedrals. I've seen many of the great cathedrals of England. Canterbury, Coventry, York, Wells, and Westminster Abbey. I will tell you, I wouldn't do well in a tour group. I spend time in these places. Wander around, explore the nooks and crannies. I read the plaques, look at the windows, the statues, the carvings of wood and stone. Stare at the vaulted ceilings. I love the sound of footfalls on stone floors and the smell of candles in the chapels.

Many of you have heard me tell of my earliest memories in church. Vine Street Christian Church in Nashville Tennessee. When I was a child, Vine Street was right downtown, a red brick building on Seventh Avenue that seemed huge to a small boy. It was no Canterbury or York, but in my memory, it was a kind of cathedral. The sanctuary had a high ceiling and was filled with carved wood. There were passages and hallways - dark and mysterious. My affection for historic downtown churches is rooted in a sense of awe and wonder and easy familiarity that I felt as a boy in old Vine Street.

One of my favorite books is entitled *Cathedral*. It is a children's book actually. With pen and ink drawings and simple, sparse description, David Macaulay tells how the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages were constructed. Tells how the trenches of the foundation were dug with picks and shovels. Tells how stones and beams were cut and carved by hand. How massive stones were lifted to their place at great heights without benefit of cranes. The marvel to me is that the generation that began to build the cathedral did not live to see its completion. Those who dug the foundation did not live long enough to worship under its roof. There is a sermon there - a sermon in stone and stone - particularly for our time, we who want it all and want it now.

It would take the better part of a century to build a Canterbury or York or Westminster Abbey. That is one of the things that amazes me about the temple that Solomon built. He built that temple in seven years. (Remember, it was seven years ago that we purchased over three acres of land from the city.) Granted, the temple that Solomon built was not as large as the cathedrals

that would be built in Europe 2000 years later. But for its time, its size and its grandeur is unequaled.

Solomon spared no expense. Read the sixth and seventh chapters of 1 Kings. It is a remarkable account of how this temple was built. Stones were finished in quarry and then brought to the place of construction so that there would be no sound of hammer or axe within the temple as it was constructed. The interior was finished in cypress and cedar and everything was overlaid with gold. *Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold... then he drew chains of gold across in front of the inner sanctuary. Next he overlaid the whole house with gold, even the whole altar that belonged in the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold.* In the inner sanctuary - the cherubim with wings outstretched were carved from olivewood - overlaid with gold - walls carved with palm trees and open flowers - overlaid with gold. Everywhere - gold, gold. Floors and walls - all gold.

It is easy to understand why some modern readers are put off by the description of Solomon's temple. One writes: *As I read the report in 1 Kings, I was amazed at its endless detailing of just how expensive the temple was.... The construction is "gold, gold" gold." The stones are "costly, costly, costly." ...The reason for all of this repetition hit me: Solomon is showing off! ... Given the immense and unfettered power of the global economy in our day, this wearisome report of the temple in Jerusalem is a warning of how religion can, and does, become a commodity. The practices of religious communal life is priced out according to an alien standard: money value, not theological value.*

Those of us who grew up in the 60's and 70's have heard that before. We have thought that ourselves. *Why build great, elaborate houses of worship... we could use the money to feed the poor. What God wants is not come elaborate sanctuary covered with gold. What God wants is mercy and justice and kindness.* Fred Craddock tells a wonderful story of preaching at the dedication of a new church building **back in those days**. A visiting minister stood up to give the prayer of dedication and said: *O Lord, destroy this building so that we can be the church!* Fred observed that the members of the congregation, who still owed three quarters of a million dollars on that building did not appreciate that prayer. But it lifts up the tension that we must feel when we read the story of Solomon and his temple.

After all, we know the building is not the main thing. The church is not a building. I remember hearing Bob Kintner teach this congregation to sing: *I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together. The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people.* I have sat in this room and sung that song. And, of course, the person who wrote that song is right. And those who come into this room and sense that they are in a special place and a sacred place and a place that speaks to the presence of God is also right.

Part of us says *yes, Solomon is showing off.* Turning religious practice into something that is measured by how much gold is spent. And part of us says: *Solomon spared no expense to express, in a visible and tangible way, the glory and majesty of God.* Which is right? Both are right.

The fact of the matter is that our faith is never pure or spiritual. We imagine God, we envision faith, with reference to things that are visible and tangible. Go into a meeting house at Shakertown. It is as simple and stark and plain as a room can be, and its very simplicity speaks to a way of living in the presence of God. We need things we can see and things we can touch to

represent for us things that we cannot see or touch or even describe. A carved door. A picture on the wall of a Sunday School classroom. Stained glass window. Pool of water. Table. Pitcher. Loaf of bread. Our faith is shaped and sustained by things we see and touch. A candle. I remember a night at high school church camp. Friday night - the closing worship service. The chapel at this church camp was on the side of a little hill overlooking a small lake - about an acre pond really. Each of us was given a candle that had been stuck in a little block of Styrofoam. We lit our candles and went down to the edge of the little pond and I quickly lost sight of which one was mine. But it didn't matter. We were there, all there, our lights shining in the darkness, our lights shining on the face of that dark and deep water. It was a holy moment. And then, a breeze picked up and blew the candles to the other side of the little pond and caught some dried grass on the other side of the lake on fire. The holy moment ended with the camp director running around the lake with a bucket to put out the fire that our candles had started. What were we talking about? Faith needs things - visible and tangible things - but those things always point to something beyond. The things themselves, no matter how much awe or wonder they evoke, are just things.

Solomon knew this. He had spent years building this temple, this house for God. Spared no expense. Fine woods. Finest stones. Finest workmanship. And everywhere... gold. Walls and floors and ceilings... gold. Elaborate carvings... gold. Must have been an awesome sight. But when the day came for Solomon to dedicate this temple, this is what he prayed. *O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart... Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built. ... Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. O hear in heaven your dwelling place... heed and forgive.*

All of the ambiguity and ambivalence of faith. We built this house for you, O Lord, we built it as best we could. But we know that it cannot contain you. All of heaven and earth cannot contain you, and we cannot even imagine what *all of heaven and earth* means. We built this house for you, O Lord, but we built it for us too, because we cannot wrap our minds around eternity and we cannot grab hold of infinite love, and so we need this place. We recognize that we are small and limited in what we can imagine and believe, and so we need this place. Heed who we are, and forgive... and bless us again.