

Willing Spirits

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 13, 2019 <> Stewardship Kick-off Sunday
Text: Exodus 35:20-29

We're going to start off this morning's message a little differently than we usually do because this sermon won't make any sense if you don't have some idea of what it is that we're talking about. Today's scripture text and the message it inspires goes back to the very first sacred structure ever constructed for the purpose of worshipping God even as it provided a place for God's people to gather and celebrate being God's people together. That structure is something calling the Tent of the Presence of the Tent of Meeting and it was literally mobile. It was the sacred space of a nomadic people – the Israelites were just at the beginning of their 40 years of wandering in the desert – so this sacred space was, of course, a tent. It bears only the slightest resemblance to what we think of as a church or synagogue today but understanding the uniqueness of its construction is important to appreciating the extraordinary way in which it was created.

The Tent of the Presence was created during the time of Moses which occurred during the late Bronze Age or somewhere between 1550-1200 BCE. Obviously, no real time images of the Tent of the Presence exist. All we have is the words of Exodus to help us imagine what it looked like. Different artists have

different ideas on this – no surprise – but I came across one in particular I like. It seems the most genuine to me at least in terms of helping us to imagine ourselves in the midst of this story. So, I have made some copies of this artistic rendering of the Tent of Presence (*hold up*) to pass around so you can see it for yourself. This is actually a still of the Tent taken out of a www.Youtube.com video. The link for the video, which is excellent, appears in today's Sabbath Circles© lesson. It's worth the time to watch as it gives you a real sense of what it is we're talking about in the text we read for worship this morning. (*pass around pictures*)

As you can see from the image, this was an extraordinary structure. It is essentially an early version of the Jerusalem Temple constructed from fabric. There is an outer courtyard ringed by a wall, in this case a wall of linen. Most of that fabric is white, except for the entrance way where the fabric is of the most beautiful spun cloth made from blue and purple and crimson yarns. Within that courtyard is the altar for sacrifice and a basin for washing. Further inside is the Tent of Presence itself which contains some sparse furnishings along with silver and brass candelabra. Within this, all the way at the back, was another smaller tent which was called the Holy of Holies. It contained the Ark of the Covenant and inside the Ark of the Covenant resided the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments (the second set because the first set got broken by Moses in the midst of the whole

Golden Calf debacle). This structure was called the Tent of the Presence or the Tent of Meeting because this is where the people encountered the presence of God.

The construction of the Tent of the Presence marks the time when God instructs the people, via Moses, as to the practicalities of living out the new covenant they had with God in the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments describe the people's relationship with God. They are not to have any gods but God. They are not to make any idols or graven images of God and they are not to make wrongful use of God's name. The fourth commandment is to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy and that's where the Tent of the Presence comes in. The people needed a place to gather for worship, not an image because that would be breaking the 1st & 2nd Commandments. No, they needed a place to gather to offer sacrifice and remind themselves of what it meant to be God's people. Since they were in the midst of their 40 years of wandering as a direct result of the whole Golden Calf incident, their sacred site had to be transportable which this Tent of the Presence was. They also needed special leaders to guide them in their worship and to be responsible for the transportation of the Tent of the Presence. Enter Moses' brother Aaron, and his sons, who became the original priests.

In this morning's text, we are picking up the story just after God has told Moses what the people are to do to build the Tent of

the Presence and Moses, in turn, has relayed God's request to the people. Then Moses sends them out to do what he asked. And, what he asked of them was to find among their own things – it's all they had – the materials needed to create out of nothing this Tent of the Presence to honor the request of their God. Today's text is the description of what happens when the people return to Moses with what they had gathered for this extraordinary task before them. Let's bear in mind that these things Moses asked for – gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and crimson yarns; fine linen cloth; goat's hair, tanned ram's skins and fine leather; acacia wood; oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and fragrant incense; onyx stones and gems – would have been very precious to these people. These are items they would have carried out of Egypt with them. Where else would they have come from? These items were literally all they had and Moses was asking for them.

What I want us to pay attention to here is how Moses asked for their help. First of all, he framed all of it as an offering to God. This is actually where the idea of calling our financial gifts to the church which we put in the plate on Sundays "offerings." So, these extraordinary items he's asking of the people he calls "offerings to God" right off the bat. We're not doing this to have some fancy place to hang out on the Sabbath, he's telling them. We're not doing this so our place of worship is better than the temples of Egypt or the worship places of the Canaanites or

anyone else we might encounter as we wander along. We're doing this, we're building this Tent of the Presence, because God asked us to and we need your help to do it.

The next thing Moses does in his ask of the people is to acknowledge that if people are going to give to this extent, if they are going to give up items precious to them for this offering to God, they have to be *willing* to do that in the first place. Put another way, he wants the people to give not because they must but because they may, out of love and reverence for God. He says, "everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing ... [came]... and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service... ." The people responded as God asked them to, bringing everything God had asked for and they did it because their hearts were stirred – they knew they were doing this for God! And their spirits were willing, because they knew what they were giving would make a real difference to their own community. This Tent of Presence would be their tangible link to God and to each other. It would remind them every time they saw it who they were as the people of God and why it mattered. Their spirits were willing and their hearts were stirred because they were willing and excited to accept the challenge of creating this structure that would enable and empower them to do what it was God was asking of them. They

were literally giving of themselves to make God's plans, God's hopes and dreams for them, real.

I love this story. It is powerful in its simplicity of how God's people reacted to God's request of them. It's extraordinary, really. I can't even fathom giving up the family silver or bronze you lugged through the desert from Egypt so you would have one nice thing for your new home. Or giving away that fine linen you had so wanted to use for a first meal in your new home. Or parting with the beautiful colored yarns or any of the items on Moses' impossible list. But, the people did. They did because they gave not from their own scarcity but from the abundance of their stirred hearts and willing spirits. They gave because they trusted God was in their midst and that it mattered for them to create this sacred space – their sacred space – as God asked them to. They gave because they knew without them it wouldn't happen.

So, it's not a stretch to think of this story we read today as a sort of first "stewardship campaign." There was a need to create and maintain a physical structure where worship and ministry could happen under the guidance of a staff whose call this was. Sound familiar? It should! This is exactly why churches have stewardship campaigns to this day. We have this beautiful, unique structure which needs to be maintained so worship and ministry and outreach in the community can happen. This is our home base. This is the place where we gather to celebrate being

the people of God in this community of place. This where we come to experience the presence of God in worship, in work and in each other. We're able to do what we do because we have a staff – a pastor, a music director, a secretary and a sexton – who work together to keep things humming along. Stewardship season is the time when we do what Moses did in a slightly different way. We don't give you all a shopping list and send you home. We remind you that it takes money to do everything we do and that money comes primarily from one source – the pledges of the people in the church, members and friends. In the weeks ahead, we will be talking about individual stories on why this church stirs people's hearts enough to create spirits willing to support this church in all the ways needed to keep us moving forward. The UCC stewardship theme for this year comes from John 14:6 where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life..." So, over the next three weeks you will hear three "My Way" moments as folks share what this church means in their lives and why they support it as they do. I'm thinking we're going to hear some good stories!

And why wouldn't we? You all know all this stuff already. This is not new information to you. This church has done an extraordinary job managing its finances in every respect and that is solely because you have extraordinary people in leadership positions as well as wonderful people always willing to pitch in

whatever way they are asked to. Even if I had forgotten that, which I never will, I was reminded of it powerfully again yesterday at our Sacred Threads retreat.

Seven of us gathered with not much more than a hope of creating some new paraments and banners for this sacred space. We had one firm idea of a banner we wanted to do – it's in process at the back of Fellowship Hall – and a vague idea of what we'd like to do with the paraments but that's pretty much it. When I arrived at 9:15am, Fellowship Hall was pretty much empty. By 10:15 it was full of ironing boards, irons, fabrics by the yard, scissors and everything we would need for the task at hand. We had decided previously to begin by sorting through all the banners in the sacristy so we brought them all out to the Hall and spread them out. Several surfaced we didn't know we had, and one no one could recall ever seeing up in the sanctuary. Slowly we went through them, targeting some for "the archives," relegating some to the pile for the Jonnycake fabric recycling service and freshening up others. Soon we realized we had a lot of beautiful banners so that only a few more were needed. In three and a half hours these extraordinary women with willing spirits came together and reminded me all over again how incredible you all are and what an amazing church this is. I'm looking forward to our Stewardship season this year and you should be too! We'll be re-discovering together all the ways what we do really does make a

difference in the existence of this church and, by extension, all the lives this church touches. Willing spirits are our inheritance and our future. I wonder what God has in mind for us in 2020...

Amen.