

A Place for God

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 23, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: 1 Kings 8:14-21

So, let me ask you a question: What is your favorite part of this building which is our church? And let me be clear, I am not talking about the people here. I mean the actual physical building. What is your favorite part of our actual physical building and why is it your favorite? And for those of you joining us online who might never have been in this space, what is your favorite place in any church you have visited. You can note it in the chat. *(pause for answers)*

I've asked this question because, as Gary's Stewardship Moment revealed, this is the Sunday when we are talking about our actual physical building. Like any building – your house or your school or the building where you work or the doctor's office you need to go to or the store where you shop – any building, including the church, has expenses involved in maintaining it and keeping it operational and functional. None of that just happens. Gary has given us an excellent summary of how we approach that task in our church. I'd like us to reflect together on why that matters, why our building itself matters to who we are as a faith community and how it contributes to what we are trying to do as God's people in this community.

As we consider this, it only makes sense to revisit what we know about the first "house of God" ever constructed as a physical building, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The construction of this building – known as The Temple or the First Temple – is the story in 1 Kings from which today's reading is taken. The idea of building a permanent "house for God" had first come up during the reign of King David. Up until that point, God had traveled with the Israelites in the "Tent of the Presence" which could be easily erected wherever the

people happened to find themselves. This was the obvious solution for a “house for God” given the nomadic existence of the people as they fought to establish a permanent homeland for themselves within the confines of the land God had given them. The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles tell this story. There are lots of leaders talked about in these stories of this time period before Israel had morphed from nomadic tribes into a full-blown kingdom, albeit a small one. Samson, Saul, and King David to name a few. Solomon, the one who finally built the Temple, was David’s son. The story of how Solomon became David’s heir is a tale of palace intrigue to rival any made for TV movie but that is not what we’re focusing on today. Solomon building the Temple is.

That Solomon built the original Temple in Jerusalem is one of the historical reference points in the bible we assume is true. We trust that there was a Temple, that it was built in Jerusalem and that it was built by Solomon. It was intricately designed according to God’s precise instructions. It was lavishly decorated with cedar wood and gold everywhere. Who could be where in the building was strictly proscribed before people were ever allowed to even see it from its own courtyard. The central focal point of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, a small room at the center of the Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Yes, this was the same Ark of the Covenant the possession of which was the whole point of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* movie. Solomon even references this particular piece of antiquity in verse 21 as he describes the main reason he had the Temple built: “There I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.” By the way, what was that covenant which was inside the ark? Do you remember? Excellent trivia question! Anyone know? Hint: It is carved on two pieces of stone and has ten parts to it.

The Ten Commandments! That is the covenant contained within the Ark. Or at least it's supposed to be inside the ark. No one knows because the ark itself has been missing for millennia, ever since the original Temple was destroyed by the conquering Babylonians.

This is the stuff of which adventure legends are made! *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and many related adventure stories have been spun from this quest to find the Ark of the Covenant. Just to put this in some kind of time frame, the First Temple located on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Solomon's Temple, was built in the 10th century BCE. It was destroyed by the invading Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE. Easy to see the roots of this adventure story – a magnificent temple destroyed by marauding armies who also absconded with the ark not to mention all those fancy gold fixtures inside the temple. The only problem is that no actual archaeological evidence supporting the existence of the temple as described in these chapters in the bible has ever been found. Granted, the temple mount in Jerusalem has not been fully explored since it now is the home of the Muslim mosque known as the Dome of the Rock. But the likelihood that Solomon's Temple as it is described in these texts ever existed at all is diminishing as biblical scholars learn more and more about this time period in history.

So, if scholars are not convinced this building even existed, why am I even asking us to reflect on it together this morning? Candidly, I don't really care whether or not Solomon's Temple ever existed as a physical building. At least not in the sense that its actual existence is part of a pedestal on which my faith is built. No physical building is, in and of itself, the foundation of a person's faith, of one's relationship with God. No, the building – temple, church, synagogue or mosque – is a tool used for the crafting of faith. What do I mean by that? How is a church building a tool? I would argue in several ways. First and

foremost, a church building is a gathering place for the people of God to come together to share their faith with each other, to read and study the bible together, to sing together, to pray together, to eat together, to celebrate together, to mourn together. The church is the place where we, God's beloved community, gather in order to be formed into the people of God. In this gathering place, we support each other in the work of becoming who God needs us to be in this moment in this community, working together as best as we are able, to do what we believe God is asking us to do to make a difference here, in the lives of real people.

And we do. We do make a real difference in the lives of real people. We do that in obvious ways through things like our support of Operation Fresh Start and other mission and service projects we have supported: like Church World Service, like disaster relief for the hurricane victims in Florida earlier this month, and in other places in recent years. We support local food pantries with food donations they know they can count on and let me assure you those donations mean more and more to our neighbors ever day. When I dropped off our last batch of donations at the PNC two weeks ago, I ran into a woman who was there picking up food for her family. The PNC volunteer recognized me as being from the church and asked if I had more food to drop off. I said yes and she turned to the woman whom she had been helping to excuse herself for just a minute to go and get someone to help me unload the food from my car. The woman turned to me said, "you're dropping off food? How wonderful!" I identified myself as the pastor of our church explaining that it had come from all of you and she said, "please thank everyone in your church for me! I don't think you know how much this food pantry means to people like me. I've never had to do anything like this before, but my food stamps were cut when my daughter got a few more hours at work. I just don't

know what we would do without this food. We would be going hungry!” So, on behalf of her, and all of our neighbors like her, I bring you her gratitude for your donation efforts, which as the baskets under our altar remind us every week, are rooted in this physical space. Our efforts here do make a real difference to real people! We make a difference to the community, and to each other. Providing a place for that to be organized and coordinated is another way the church is a tool for the work of God happening in the world outside our doors.

Another indicator that the church is a tool for God’s work is evident in each of you and how you live your lives as faithful people of God. You are nurtured and encouraged in your own personal lives and work in this place. The Jesus way of life we learn and practice here together informs who you are in the community outside our doors. You carry the love of Jesus, the message of Jesus, with you every time you go out into the community as you. Every time you are kind and smiling when a nasty response is so tempting, you are carrying Jesus’ love into the community. The work you do, the time and energy you invest into your own families, into your personal prayer life and in our prayer life as a faith community makes a difference. Here we experience the power of prayer, lived out in commitments we make to pray for others each day as life unfolds. This sacred space is where you personally see and experience the transforming power of prayer. And I’m not talking about prayer as some sort of magic incantation which causes miracles to happen because that is not what prayer is about, really. Prayer, as taught and experienced in this space, is about being personally transformed as you are enfolded in God’s unfathomable love and grace. Prayer is about entrusting the deepest part of ourselves to God. This is the space where that personal

transformation into the person God wants you to be, knows you can be, happens.

You know all this of course. I'm not telling you anything new. What I am doing is reminding you that this building, with all its issues and irritations – episodic roof leaks, peeling paint, weed cracked lower parking lot, ever escalating utility bills – this building provides a space to be the people of God together. This is a sacred place, designed, built and maintained as a place for God in our midst. This church building with all the things we love about it and all the things we don't, is our physical home in God. More importantly, it is sacred space dedicated to God's presence in our midst, and in the midst of our community and the world. And that, dear ones, is so very important.

I remember when I was a little girl growing up in the Presbyterian Church on the hill near my house. My mom always called the church "God's house" and I used to wonder if God really lived there. In my five year old mind, I could not figure out just where in the church building God actually lived. The minister of my church at that time was an ancient old guy – probably the age I am now – and even though he had white hair, I knew he wasn't God. There were curtains behind the cross though. Maybe God lived there? Seemed unlikely. Too small. Maybe God was hiding in one of those creepy cupboards or closets in the basement? But they also seemed too small. Maybe God was in the "little kids" room – it had the best toys after all. But I didn't think God cared about toys. Maybe in the church kitchen where all those wonderful church suppers were created? No, God couldn't relax in that spot. No matter how hard I tried, I could not figure out where God lived in the church so I just trusted that God was there somewhere. Gradually, as I got older, it dawned on me that God didn't actually live in my church because

there were so many other churches in my town. God couldn't physically live in all of them and I just didn't think God would choose only one to live in. Slowly I realized that God was beyond buildings, beyond being held in any one physical place. This slowly evolving epiphany about the nature of God also clarified for me that the physical space of the church was still the place where I found God. By this time, it was not the only place I found or experienced God, not by a long shot. By then I had experienced the incredible awe of a spectacular sunset, the treasured beauty of my mom's gardens and many other sacred places where God's presence was real and tangible to me. None of this changed the simple truth that the church – any church – would always be the one place I knew I could *always* encounter God, whenever I was in that space. It didn't matter which church I entered, which denomination it was or what the building looked like. I just knew God would be there and God always was.

I know God is here. Not in the same way you and I are here, but here just the same. And knowing that, having that sacred sense of God's presence in this place makes all the difference on those days that have been rough and disappointing. In those moments of sadness, grief and fear. And, in those moments of quiet joy that I find here in this space. It radiates out from my heart to envelop my whole being. I find God's light here. I find God's love here and I know you do too. Why else would you be here, in this place for God, if you did not want to encounter God for yourself in whatever way God touches you here? Dear ones, this is a place dedicated to God's presence in our lives as individuals and as a gathered body of God's beloved people. This is a place for God and God has entrusted it to our care. We are richly blessed as a result. May we always treasure this unique and beautiful sacred space as the gift of God it is, and may God give us the patience and the strength to keep it so. Amen.

