

No Temple in the City

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

John 14:23-29 *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,*

I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Something kind of new is happening here at the Church of the Covenant. On Sunday mornings, our worshiping community has been filling the hallway and parlor. This is a change for a group that normally does not fill the chapel itself. There is also the invigorating presence of children and young people. It is hard to be close to the kingdom of God if we don't have a child in our life. Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to children and to those who are like children. The presence of children is a powerful gift to our community.

It is a joy to welcome those who are discovering that the Church of the Covenant exists. We are a little difficult to find. We tend to keep a low profile, focusing more on doing what we feel called to do than advertising ourselves. However, people are finding in this the kind of spiritual community they have been looking for. I think this may happen more and more as our life and ministries express to others that there can be a Christian community that is compassionate in spirit, that tries to struggle honestly with what it means to follow Jesus in today's world, and that emphasizes practicing our faith in all aspects of our life.

The joy of new people bringing their lives and gifts is something of a crisis for us, which may sound like an odd thing to say. We do not emphasize the importance of numerical growth. We see membership in terms of personal discipleship, bringing one's whole life into faithfulness to God through following Jesus Christ. We lift up the importance of commitment and spiritual disciplines as a way of deepening our spiritual life and discerning what God calls us to do with our lives and gifts for the sake of the world. We don't ask people to "join the church." Rather, we try to keep before others and ourselves Christ's call to discipleship. That commitment must always be personal and free because it involves our whole lives, our whole being. It means deciding to live our lives as a journey of faith, a journey inward in the life of prayer in its fullest meaning, and a journey outward in using our gifts in the service of life as we feel called and led by God.

The challenge for us is: How do we hold up this way of seeing and living Christian faith, welcoming all who respond, while remaining clear

about what we call the "integrity of church membership," that is, one's commitment to the life of discipleship? There are a lot of people who are deeply spiritual people, looking for a religious community that has integrity, that really strives to live the faith it professes, a community that focuses on the challenges and the blessings of a committed life of faith. How will we work with the challenges of more people feeling drawn and called to this kind of faith community so that we continue to BE that kind of community?

I was puzzling over these sorts of questions as I encountered the scripture readings for this week, particularly from the Revelation to John and John's gospel. These readings suggested a way of looking at our life as a community at this point. In the Revelation to John, these words stood out: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." The absence of the temple in the new Jerusalem is an image for God's desire to be in an intimate relationship with us. This was expressed earlier in Chapter 21: "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; and they will be God's peoples, and God himself will be with them." John's vision was really not about some future time but about life here and now, living out of a real and faithful relationship with God in the present moment. Jesus' whole life was the expression of human life lived in complete harmony with God and God's purposes. Temples can get in the way. Church buildings can get in the way. They divert our resources from serving others and our attention from our own lives and our relationship with God. In the new Jerusalem, the kingdom of God, the life God made us to live, there is no temple, nothing that can stand between God and us. This relationship with God brings us the healing, the wholeness pictured by the tree of life with healing leaves that stands alongside the river of life flowing from God's throne.

When the seed of this community was sown, the handful of folks wanted a small place to meet together for worship. But worship was not seen as an end in itself. It was nourishment for ministry, for mission. The church of the Covenant was not established for itself but to undergird what eventually became Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship and Camp Kum Ba Yah. The church exists for ministry, for mission, not for itself. Our ministries flow out of persons and their relationship with God, what they feel God is calling them to do in response to a particular need in the world.

So the Church of the Covenant will never build a church building for itself in order to house more people. We will be seeking God's guidance and wisdom in other directions so that all who come here to explore and move toward a deeper spiritual commitment and life will be able to do so. And that way will always involve, for us, the small, not the big. Key to our understanding and experience has been the importance of the small. It is mustard seed spirituality, how Jesus talked about the kingdom of God as a miniscule seed, always growing from the small.

Jesus took a small group of disciples, worked with them, taught them, involved them in what he was doing, eliciting their gifts, turned them

toward the world and its needs. God's power works through small groups of people committed to each other in love and to the world through the use of their gifts for a call they are following. A specific call—establish a center for community in the central city, or a place for people recovering from addiction to continue rebuilding their lives, or a place where people can come for silence, peacefulness, and the touching of their truest, deepest self and their relationship with God. God's spirit and power is in the small, not the big.

So, we have always envisioned the church not as temple or church building but as a community of people discovering and deepening their relationship with God, and living out of that relationship in a fruitful, redemptive way in the world. This is where the reading from John's gospel spoke to me. Before his death, Jesus told his disciples he was giving them his peace so that they could live in the world without fear. By "world," John is not talking about the world as the good creation of God but the "world" of life lived out of synch with God and God's purposes. It is the world that fosters fear, hate, self-centeredness, violence, greed. Jesus wants his disciples to live fully in the world but from a whole different "place," out of their relationship with God.

The spiritual life is about living in and out of the peace Jesus is talking about. What we call the inward journey is the way we give attention to our spiritual lives, the way we give a shape and order to our lives so that we stay grounded in the peace Christ gives and live out of that peace for the sake of the world God made. That is why we hold up the importance of making a commitment to our own spiritual lives, to spiritual disciplines or practices that help us stay in touch with our relationship with God, with who we are in God, and what God is calling us to do with our lives. When we are on that journey, we are able to live without fear, or at least to embrace our fears in something larger and deeper—the love and presence of God.

This is taking responsibility for our lives as spiritual beings. It is responding to Christ who calls us to be who we were made to be, to keep growing and deepening in our relationship with God and God's creation. It is discovering what God has put us on this earth to do with these precious, unique, and brief lives God has given us, using the gifts God has given us for the sake of the world. This is living in the world rooted in the peace of Christ.

Though each of us must make that commitment for ourselves, taking ultimate responsibility for our own lives, we cannot do it by ourselves. We need others who are working with the same things. We need a community. We need a few others with whom we can share honestly and deeply what is going on in our lives, our struggles and insights, our discerning of what God is doing or wants to do in and through us. This is where it all comes together, in small groups of people working to live out their faith. This is the temple that is not a temple, the church that is not a church building but a community in which the peace of Christ is known and nurtured in us.

Our community as a whole cannot be that small group. We need to pray, talk, and discern together how we can continue to evolve in ways that provide this kind of context for persons. Essential to our way of being the church is and has been the mission group. Someone feels called to a particular mission, a way of living out God's love to meet a particular need, to be a particular expression of God's love for the world. The call is shared and a few others respond who feel drawn to that same vision for mission. The group begins to meet regularly for worship and prayer, for sharing their lives with one another around the spiritual disciplines they decide are essential for their life together and their work, and to carry out the work of what they feel called to do. In such a group not only is the work of the mission carried forward but also those in the group have a small community for their continuing spiritual growth.

What other forms or structures might emerge so that we welcome those who feel called into this community and at the same time provide ways for everyone to be involved in this kind of vital spiritual life?

Perhaps a new worshiping community or communities might emerge that would meet at a different time or place than Sunday morning here in the Church House. Since beginning our work with the Festival Center, we have talked from time to time about a new worshiping community forming there. It could include the same spiritual principles, if you will, as the Church of the Covenant here. It could be intentionally inter-racial, crossing social and economic boundary lines that separate people. And it might have as its mission focus the life and work of the Festival Center. That is only one example of how God's spirit might work to create new things.

Maybe what God is leading us toward is forming other kinds of small groups. For example, spiritual life or spiritual journey groups. Such a group could be no more than six or eight people and would meet frequently for prayer and worship, for the sharing of its members' spiritual lives, struggles, and growth, and for helping individuals focus on and discern what they feel God has called and gifted them to do with their lives for the world. Perhaps out of such groups persons would emerge with a clear sense of something they feel called to do. Other mission groups might then be born.

I want to leave us this morning with a call for each and all of us together to reflect, pray, discuss with one another, and be open to how we can be a faith community that welcomes all who feel drawn here and at the same time keeps focused on being a community of commitment, spiritual growth and deepening, and service in the world. Our community itself is to be God's temple, where God can dwell closely with us and we with God, and where we each and together remain grounded and rooted in the peace Christ gives. Living in that peace and out of that peace is what will enable us to live differently in this world, in ways that bring life and not death, hope and not despair, healing and not further suffering.