

2 Samuel 7:1-14 “The Walls of Our House”

Not long after I first came to Chico, I was invited to attend a fellowship of Stone-Campbell heritage churches. I was told that it was a monthly lunch meeting that welcomed and included Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) churches like ours, plus Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (Non-Instrumental.) I was told, “It’s like cousins getting together at a family reunion.” I thought, “Sure, why not?” I’ve been to these sorts of meetings on a national level, why not go to a local one? They met in a large meeting room at a local restaurant here in Chico. There were churches from Hamilton City, Oroville, Chico, Paradise, Orland, Corning, and Red Bluff. There was one lone retired Church of Christ (Non-Instrumental) pastor there. I was the only Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) person there. Basically, this little family gathering was a fellowship of Independent Christian Churches with one token Disciple and one token Church of Christ pastor. Not the first time I’ve been the token Disciple at an Independent Christian Church gathering. That was all four years of seminary for me. What I forgot about is how obsessed they can be about numbers ... particularly the size of their churches. When I introduced myself to the other ministers there, they wanted to know two things: Where was the church, and how many members did I have. After being asked this question a dozen times, I started thinking, “Good grief, this is getting tedious.” Finally someone set themselves up to be on the receiving end of my smart-aleckery. They introduced themselves to me and asked where my church was. I said “Behind Chico Junior High or Chico Cemetery depending on how you look at it.” Then he asked the million dollar question: “Oh? How big are you?” I couldn’t help myself. Even though this little voice in my head kept telling me, “Don’t do it. Don’t you take that bait. You be cordial, professional and tell him what you know he wants to know. Do ... not ... say ... what ... you’re ... thinking.” Of course, I ignored that little voice and said, “I’m about 5’9”, 220.” And what’s sad is, I could tell by his face that he didn’t get what I was saying. He was doing all sorts of math in his head ... okay,

does that mean 5 people on pastoral staff, 9 on support staff with 220 average worship attendance?”

It’s funny how churches can be so obsessed with numbers. I was talking to the pastor of a mega-church in Kentucky once and he was making a comment about how you can get away with some things in a church of 1,000 that you’d never be able to get away with it in a church of “only” 300. *Only* 300?! Now ... I *got* what he was saying. He was talking about the differences in social and logistical dynamics between mega-churches and others. But “only?” Did he have to use that word? “Oh, you mean those little bitty churches of *only* 300.” And I hated myself for the little twinge of envy that hit at that moment. “Hmph. Must be nice having a church with 1,000 people.” Mind you, I wouldn’t know the first thing about how to handle a church that size. I’m sure that folks would have to spend months telling me, “Pastor, you don’t have to do that ... we’ve got *staff* who take care of that.” Isn’t it funny how many accomplishments we measure by numbers? Pastors of big churches are always going to be perceived as more successful. In my head, I know that’s not true, but my feelings are another matter, because I know a lot of “small church” ministers who wonder about what sort of legacy they’re going to leave behind. What sort of “monuments” will remain to show what we’ve actually achieved in ministry aside from numbers.

We can see this happening in the passage Jerry just read. King David was dreaming about building a huge, impressive temple alongside of his already impressive palace. Which makes sense, right? Sounds like his motives are spot on when he explains it: “How is it that I can be living in this magnificent house while the Lord, the God of Israel, is still housed in a tent?” Granted, the “tent” David was talking about was no ordinary tent. The tent served as the “traveling temple” to haul the Ark of the Covenant around while the Hebrew people journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments and thus the very presence of God. Don’t get me wrong, it was a pretty impressive structure in itself, but now that it was standing alongside an

increasingly grand royal palace instead of rows of little tents, David thought it looked a bit ... makeshift.

And when the king is looking to build impressive structures to let the world know about the power and prestige of his reign, then you better believe he's going to want to build a nice temple to honor the God who you believe will keep that reign going. So then David announced his plan to the chief prophet Nathan. And with barely a thought, Nathan okayed the plan. The man in power wants to build a temple? Hey, why not? It looks good for religion, so it must be a good thing. Or is it? Well, that night, the Lord spoke to Nathan and suggested that maybe he should have consulted with God before jumping to conclusions. So the next morning Nathan went back to David with a message from God: "No, you are not the one to build me a temple. I'm still backing you as king, but I don't want you building me a house. I'm quite happy with my tent for the time being. Thanks though."

Okay. So much for that bright idea. But why do you think God was so reluctant to trade a portable tabernacle for a stone temple? Well, the whole point of the tabernacle was its portability and accessibility. The people were on the move after they were delivered from slavery in Egypt, so wherever they went, there was God. But what happens once you settle down somewhere and want to build a big, beautiful, majestic *permanent* home for God? Well first of all, you start thinking of the temple as *God's* place, which sounds great. But you also start thinking of all *other* places as *absent* from God. And then you start thinking that God's undivided attention is always on the people of *this* place. But people in other places? They are alien. They are "other." And then you start to think that the very presence of the temple means you automatically receive God's presence and protection. And maybe you start designing little features into the architecture that reflect these beliefs about who really matters to God and who doesn't. You start building walls that only the High Priest could pass through. You start building walls that only Israelite men could pass through, and walls that made sure that women and children and gentiles were kept at a distance

which, of course, demonstrated their greater distance from God. Now none of this happen under David's watch. But all of these things did happen when David's son Solomon eventually built the first temple. Over time, the people were so thoroughly used to thinking that God resided only within the temple walls that when they were dragged off into exile in Babylon, they completely fell apart. They cried out "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land, a land where the Lord does not live?" Well ... what happened to the God who gladly lived in a travelling tent? Apparently this God had been forgotten.

So in light of that history, maybe we can conclude that when powerful religious men want to build grand temples, not only are they building something they can remember, they're also building walls that can contain and monopolize their God. They are building walls that will declare to all who see them that this God is *our* God, and that *we* are God's people and the rest of you are *not*. See, we want to claim God. We want to own God. We want God to secure our status and privilege as God's beloved and righteous and saved people. And who doesn't want to be their parents' favorite kid, right?

During our Bible study on the Book of Acts, we learned about how the early Christians were obsessed about who's in and who's out. Remember, the first Christians were Jews, and they had a rough time getting their heads wrapped around why God would ever want to include Gentiles in their fellowship! They spent a lot of time and energy debating about ways they could mark those who belongs to God. Or maybe they were just arguing about who God belongs to.

And yet in three of the four gospels, we see Jesus looking at the walls of the temple with his disciples and predicting that despite their impression of solidity and permanence, not one stone would be left upon another, and all would be torn down. And in the year 70 CE, that's exactly what happened. The temple had been used to divide people and to keep them at a distance from God. And yet, when Jesus died on the cross, Matthew and Mark both write that the veil of the temple was torn in two so that

the Holy of Holies was exposed. Through Jesus, God was now in and among the people. There was no more veil to separate the two. The walls that powerful men build to prove themselves as God's favorites are broken down so that *everyone* has equal access to God.

The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:20 put it this way -- "You built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." That means you and I are the building materials of the new temple. So instead of the walls being something that divide us, now the walls become the very place where we are bound together. And if we try to divide ourselves again, that new temple will come crashing down.

Back to my original illustration about how big churches and ambitious, number-obsessed pastors dream about building bigger churches. Conventional church growth wisdom says that churches grow faster with a clear sense of who's in and who's out. When the in-group are recognizably similar to one another and feel comfortable and at home with one another, you're more likely to grow. So if you want to grow a large church as quick as possible, you don't shoot for "diversity!" You try to identify an "in-group" and unite them. How? By getting folks to identify a group of "others" to reject. You label them "evil" and "lost" and do whatever you can to either keep them out or become like you. Does that sound like a game plan for our church? We can start this in the Fall if you want. Question: Why would we want to build a temple with the same kind of walls that Jesus gave his life to tear down?

Now ... if you've always seen yourself as a privileged insider, this may not sound like good news. But if you've ever been made to seem like an outsider? This is *very* good news. And that's what the word "gospel" literally means. "Good news." And here at First Christian Church, we're all about preaching the gospel, and we're all about building the kind of house that God is *delighted* to dwell in.