

July 18th, 2021

2 Samuel 7:1-14 “Temples of Palaces?”

Every Disciples congregation that I’ve served has been about the same size. Now mind you, I’ve only served four congregations, but they’ve all been roughly the same size, or at least they fit into the same categorical classification that most folks who study churches use. Outside of my occasional visit to a wanna-be mega-church in Eugene, Oregon, I’ve never spent much time in a truly *big* church. So I forget sometimes that there are pastors who haven’t spent much time in *smaller* churches.

About 9 years ago or so, I was up in Oregon for a reunion with some old friends from my high school’s Campus Life club that was instrumental to my coming to faith. So, I was talking to one of my friends who had gone into the ministry, and he was telling me about some frustrations he had with his senior pastor. He said the senior pastor was trying to develop some programs that just weren’t working in the church. He said, “I keep telling him, ‘You can get away with doing that in a church of a thousand, but it’s not going to work in a church of only 300.’”

I get what he was trying to say. For sure, there are different dynamics involved with working in churches of different sizes, but I couldn’t get past the little voice in my head that was saying, “Did he just say, ‘*Only* three hundred!?’ He’s working in a church that’s three to four times bigger than any church that I’ve worked in, and he’s talking about *only* three hundred!” Now, I don’t think he was wishing he had a thousand-member church, but I’ve got to say, there was a part of me that was thinking, “Man, I wish I had a church of *only* 300.” But then I caught myself, because I’ve often been critical of pastors and churches that are obsessed with the size of their buildings and membership rolls.

I’ve said this before, but early on when I came to Chico, I went to a gathering of Stone-Campbell churches over in Orland who met on the second Wednesday of every month for lunch. I was the lone Disciple

pastor there. Most of them were Independent Christian Churches, which I have nothing against. I went to an Independent Christian Church seminary. I just forgot how obsessed they were with numbers and the size of their congregations. Everyone I met at that meeting introduced themselves by stating their name, their congregation, and their church's average attendance. *Everyone*. After a while it started to seem like a joke. Then one guy came up to me and set himself up for a potential Jesse Kearns smart-aleck response. After he introduced himself, his congregation, and the congregation's average attendance, I said, "I'm Jesse Kearns and I'm the pastor of First Christian Church in Chico." And he said, "Oh. How big are you?" That's when a little angel landed on my right shoulder and said, "Don't do it Jesse. Do *not* go there. You will regret saying what you're thinking right now." Then a little devil landed on my left shoulder and said, "You're not gonna let this one pass are you? Chicken?" So ... I said, "I'm about 5'10" and 220 depending on what I had for dinner the night before." A couple of weeks later, Tom Shifflett told me about the Chico Area Interfaith Council that met on the same Wednesdays that the Stone-Campbell group gathered. I've been with them ever since and have served 4 terms on their executive council. They appreciate my sense of humor.

Let's face it. Pastors who build bigger buildings to accommodate their ever-growing congregations are going to be seen as more successful than ones who do not. I may not believe this lie in my head, but I sure feel it in my gut sometimes, and not in a good way. I am now closer to retirement than when I started my vocational journey. In other words, I'm winding down. I've got more years behind me in ministry than I do ahead of me. It is almost inevitable that leaders who are in my time and place in their journey of ministry will wonder, from time to time, about what sort of legacy they'll leave behind. What sort of monuments will remain to show what they've achieved?

We can see this going on in the scripture Mary read. She read about King David's desire to build a huge and impressive temple alongside of his already huge and impressive palace. Of course, it *sounds* like his

motives are good and right 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?” But that tent was no ordinary tent, right? It was the tabernacle that had served as the mobile temple when the people journeyed out of slavery in Egypt. As we talked about last week, it was a pretty impressive structure in itself, but now that it was standing alongside all of these increasingly grand permanent buildings instead of rows of little tents, David started thinking it was a bit rustic in comparison. And when the king is looking to build impressive structures to further solidify the power and prestige of his reign, of course a temple to the God who *guarantees* his reign is going to be high on his list of priorities. So David told the Prophet Nathan about his plan to build a temple for God. At first, Nathan endorsed the plan. “Oh yeah, good idea. If the man in charge wants to build a building and it looks good for religion, then of course it’s a good thing.” Or is it? Well, that night, God spoke to the prophet Nathan and suggested that maybe he should have checked in with God before jumping on board with David. So, the next morning Nathan had to go back to David with a very different message from God. “OK David, last night I had a conversation with God, and God said, “Tell David ‘No. You are *not* the one to build me a temple. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still backing you as king, but I don’t want you building me a house. I’m quite happy with this tent for the time being.”

Okay, let’s take a break here and look at the difference between a portable tent and a permanent stone temple as far as their value as a symbolic dwelling place for God. The whole point of the tent was its portability. The people were on the move, and wherever they went, God was there in their midst. But what happens once you settle down somewhere and want to build a permanent home for God? Well, you start to think of this place as *God’s place* ... which means you start seeing *other* places as *not* God’s place, or maybe just *absent* from God. And then you begin to think that God’s *attention* is focused on the people of *this* place, and everyone else is an alien. And you begin to think of the temple as a guarantee of God’s presence and protection no matter what kind of bonehead decisions your rulers make because

they've strayed so far from God. And maybe ... just maybe ... you even build into the very architecture of the building your beliefs about who really matters to God and who doesn't. Who is in and who is out? Maybe you have walls that only the High Priest could pass through, or walls that only Israelite men could pass through, or walls that made sure that women, children and gentiles kept their distance, thus emphasizing *their* distance from God. And here's a spoiler alert: All of this happened when David's son, Solomon, eventually built the first temple. By then, the people were so thoroughly used to thinking that God resided only within these walls that when they were dragged off into exile in Babylon, they cried out, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land, a land where the Lord *does not live*?" For them it was clear that the God who would gladly live in a travelling tent had long been forgotten.

So in light of that history, maybe we can speculate that when powerful religious men want to build grand temples, not only are they building something to be remembered by themselves, but they are building walls that can contain and monopolize their God. They are building walls that will declare to all who can see that this God is *our* God, and that we are God's people and the rest of you are not. We want to claim God and own God and use God to secure our own status and privilege as God's beloved and righteous and saved people.

Which is very interesting if we come back to my opening comments about big churches and ambitious pastors who are keen to carry out big temple building projects like the ancient kings. Conventional church growth wisdom says that churches grow faster only with a clear sense of who's in and who's out. That's what happens when the "in-group" is recognizably similar to one another and thus they feel comfortable and at home with each other. So if you want to grow a large church in a short amount of time, you don't target diversity, you go after a particular demographic group. And furthermore, you strengthen the identity of the in-group by uniting them in a hostile rejection of "others," of those deemed to be evil, to be lost, to be aliens and strangers with no hope of ever knowing God in the world. If that's the way we are, then we are in

serious danger of re-building exactly the wrong kind of walls, the very walls that Jesus poured out his life to tear down.

If you've always seen yourself as one of the privileged insiders, you *aren't* going to think this is good news. Things change when you see that you are welcome on the inside of God's beloved temple, but that it is no longer an exclusive privilege. It is one you now share with all manner of aliens, strangers, and undesirables. If you are one who has been made to feel like an outsider, like one who could never make the grade or be accepted, this is terrific news. If you have found that the imposing walls of religious law and righteousness defined you as unacceptable and unwelcome, this is also very good news. If you've ever had biblical law or religious tradition used against you to prove that you were excluded on the grounds of your race or nationality or gender or sexuality or personal history or social background or biblical ignorance or whatever ... then this is very good news indeed. In Christ Jesus, the veil of the temple has been torn down. The dividing wall has been broken down and you are now being securely built, with everyone else, into the gracious love of God.

Sure, in practice, sometimes this can be uncomfortable and frustrating. Our little congregation here is as good an illustration of this as any. We are kind of an odd assortment of people who probably wouldn't naturally gravitate to one another if we were just looking for easy comfortable friendships with like-minded people. But comfortable friendships with our own kind is not what being the church is all about. We are here as a sign and a seed of the emerging reign of God ... a culture of radical reconciliation where we learn to love and care for one another across *every* boundary that might previously have divided us. And with the boundaries crossed and the dividing walls pulled down, we and the big church people and the alienated and unclean and the powerful kings and everyone else are gathered into one great temple of God's love and grace. This is the kind of house that God is delighted to dwell in.