

**“How to Balance our Love for Buildings
with an Awareness of their Transience”**

Mark 13:1-8

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We all know the church is not a building but the people in it, those of us who make up the body of Christ. The old term “church house” was helpful in underscoring this reality. Children learned from very early on to distinguish between the people and the buildings in which they met. But buildings do matter, sacred space matters, because every experience we have with God happens in some specific place and many of these experiences happen here.

We are dedicated and baptized in the church house, married and buried here. We may have met our life mate in church, formed some of our deepest friendships here. We have celebrated Christmas and Easter, Hanging of the Greens and The High Lonesome Mass here. The clothing ministry is housed here as is Toy Joy, children’s and youth programs are centered here. Though God is everywhere, we have so many sacred memories attached to this place that is dedicated to God.

This is a part of why stewardship matters. We want to care for this place that has nurtured us in so many ways, the buildings and all the activities that take place within them, all the community that is experienced here. This is also why we have expressed such strong feelings in the facilities assessment process. We have powerful connections to this place because of all the sacred experiences we have had here. We care deeply about these facilities, as we should.

Yet, not only is the church not the buildings, but buildings can be lost in various ways, no matter how we feel about them, because they are transient like us. I think of two church buildings that burned to the ground in different ways, evoking different emotions.

The only parsonage Dana and I lived in was sold years later to a community college which just wanted the land. They needed the house gone and decided to let the local fire department do a controlled burn as

a training exercise. Now, there were wonderful people in that church, connected to some wonderful people here, and I'm sure there was a day when a parsonage was a helpful asset and probably one that church took good care of, but by the time we lived in it, parsonages were long out-of-date and this one had not been cared for as well in years. So, suffice it to say that recent pastors and spouses were not exactly saddened by the news. We might have paid good money to watch that house burn!

In another setting, the sanctuary burned to the ground in the 1970's, about ten years before I was there. Nancy Jo Fleming's father was pastor of that church long before the sanctuary burned. There had been a thunderstorm and lightning strike in the afternoon. The fire department checked everything out, there didn't appear to be a problem, but the neighborhood was awakened in the middle of the night to the church burning to the ground. Only the Pulpit Bible survived. An electrical wire in the wall had been damaged by the lightning. With today's technology the problem would have been identified. The church was devastated. The cost of rebuilding, even with insurance, mattered but far less than the sacred memories people had of that sanctuary. Thanks to Nancy Jo, I have a brick from the building in my office.

So, sacred space matters immensely, even to those who realize the church is not the buildings, but buildings can be lost, and it is possible to have too strong of an attachment to them, a kind of adoration that borders on idolatry.

All of these issues are in play in the story we have read from Mark 13. As the story begins, Jesus and his disciples are coming out of the temple when one of the disciples says, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" This disciple is awed by the temple and rightly so. It is a massive structure and the stones that form it are huge – most of them 37 ½ feet long, 18 feet wide and 12 feet thick. Not only that, this is the place where the faith has been centered since the return from exile, the site of many sacred memories, a holy place.

But just as this disciple and perhaps the others are moved to awe, Jesus says rather pointedly, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Imagine

how we would feel if he were talking about our buildings - this sanctuary and the Lewis Building – with all the memories we have attached to this awe-inspiring space. The disciples are unsettled, to say the least, they feel like they have been punched in the gut.

As the story continues, they connect the potential destruction of the temple with the end of the world, it would have to be something cataclysmic; so, they ask when this will be, when “all these things” will be accomplished, meaning more than the fall of the temple, but the end of the world. And Jesus goes on to talk about multiples signs of the end and he says that all of these things are just the beginning of the end. Later in this chapter (13:32) he says that no one, not even him, knows when the end will come, which renders all attempts at end-times prediction absurd, as such people claim to know more than Jesus!

But the truth is one part of what Jesus is saying has happened already, the destruction of the temple. In fact, it happens not long after Jesus’ death and resurrection, in the year 70 CE. In the year 66 CE the Jewish people rebel against the Romans, but they lose in the end and the temple is first destroyed and then burned. Only part of the western wall survives. So, what Jesus says so pointedly to the disciples comes to pass. The sacred buildings the disciples stand in awe of will cease to exist in the very near future.

At the very least it ought to give us pause, reason to reflect upon the transient nature of everything in this life, and cause to consider more deeply what and who really deserves our deepest reverence, devotion and awe. To value sacred space very highly is appropriate. Biblical characters not only build worship spaces, they mark the spots where they encounter God as holy. But to lose sight of the fact that all such physical spaces have no meaning of their own, but rather have value because God has shown up, is a step in the direction of idolatry.

Everything in this life is transient. Only God endures. Only God is worthy of our highest praise. Thus, we put our faith not in buildings or traditions, not in denominations or institutions, not even in other people, the very best people. We put our faith in God because even if everything else crumbles to the ground, God will still be here. Victor Hugo put it this way – religions pass away but God remains. Indeed!

So, the question for us is this – how do we balance our love for buildings with an awareness of their transience? We might begin by acknowledging their transience. This doesn't mean we treat them with neglect. To the contrary, we care for them even more faithfully when we know they will not last forever.

We know that our lives are transient. As the prophet Isaiah says, the grass withers and the flower fades... surely the people are grass... (only) the word of our God will stand forever (40:7-8). But this doesn't mean we quit living. Rather, we cherish every day we are given, trusting in the hope of resurrection, but knowing this life is limited. In like manner, the transience of sacred space only serves to deepen our appreciation for it. But it is transient. It will not last forever.

Our challenge is this space has been here a long time, just over 159 years, not as long as the church itself, the people who have been here, but a long time. And we hope and pray that it will be here that much longer and more. Many of us have been in European cathedrals that have endured for centuries. So, who knows?

The only thing we know is that nothing in this life lasts forever. I don't interpret the fact that little chips of paint are falling from the ceiling as a sign the end is near. Nor do I sense the onset of warfare that might take the building down or an even more powerful hurricane than we have had washing us all away, though they are coming with increasing frequency and intensity. But nothing in this world lasts forever. We are wise not to invest everything in the way of hopes and dreams in anything temporary.

Something else that might help us keep things in perspective is to realize that while many of our sacred memories are tied to this place, almost all of them are also tied to people we have known and loved here. If it weren't for the people, if there was only a building, we might have had some experience of the holy. This is an awe-inspiring place. But the presence of other people who matter to us, fellow believers, companions in good times and bad, enriches these experiences of the holy immeasurably.

There is a scene in *The Notebook* wherein Noah's adult children are trying to convince their dad to leave the facility where their mother is

living. Allie has advanced dementia, she doesn't even know him, they argue, he should come home. Noah refuses, saying, "Your mother is my home. My place is with her." It is an incredibly moving scene, especially for anyone who has dealt with dementia, and anyone who has a romantic bone in his/her body. It offers a wonderful image of marriage at its best. Our home is with each other, wherever that might need to be. But it also offers a glimpse of Christian community, the church, the body of Christ. Our true home is not tied to any single physical place. It is found in being with each other – here, at Caswell on a retreat, in Honduras or Arkansas on mission trips, in our own state doing disaster relief work, wherever we are together.

So, it can help us to acknowledge the transience of all things, including our buildings, and it can help us to realize that our memories are tied to people as much as they are to place, and then, it can help us to remember that there is something, or to be more precise, Someone, more important than anything or anyone else in this world.

Buildings and other space become sacred to us because we somehow become aware of the presence of God in them. Other people matter to us for many different reasons, but they truly become sacred when we realize that a part of God lives in them and awakens the part of God living in us. Whatever is of highest value to us attains that value not just because of its own character, but because in it, or in him/her, we somehow sense the presence of the holy, the divine, God.

The good news is as long as we keep this in mind, it is "O.K." to value highly the building or relationship that has become sacred to us. It's just a matter of priorities and perspective. As long as we love God first, we can love many things and even more so people.

In a recent issue of *The Christian Century* Princeton Theological Seminary president Craig Barnes writes about the importance of sacred space. He confesses to having ambivalent feelings about buildings, partly because of all the money that is spent on them, money that could be spent on missions and ministry, and partly because of all the property meetings he has endured first as a pastor and now as a seminary president. Many of us understand on both counts...

But then, he goes on to underscore how important sacred space is and he closes his article with these words. “Everyone who graduated from Sunday School got the lesson that the real church is a family of Christian faith and not the building where they meet. Right. But every family needs a home.”

Indeed, and we have a mighty good one here, until, of course, all the stones in this world are thrown down, and we move into that even better home that is not of this world.