

“Things We Can Learn from an Ancient Service of Dedication”

1 Kings 8:22–30; 41–43

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I have participated in quite an array of dedication services over the years, blessing everything from children and families all the way to buildings and bridges. Perhaps the most interesting dedication was of the new baseball stadium in Winston-Salem in 2007 when I got to share a small stage with Hank Aaron, though some people might be drawn to the dedication of new restrooms in my last setting which I often referred to as the Chris Chapman Memorial Restrooms because there was so much resistance to the project that I thought it might get me killed. Previously for a room which seats 800, we had two one-person facilities with no handicap provisions. It didn't seem controversial to me.

Later in this service we will bless backpacks, the children who carry them and all involved in the reopening of schools in this anxious, yet hopeful, time. This afternoon there will be a dedication of Habitat for Humanity houses built this year with a number of faith coalitions. It just seems natural to set aside time to dedicate and bless the people, events and places important to us; to set aside time to pray for God's guidance. There is always richness to this experience. There is hopefulness on the front end of things that this building will be a place of healing and hope, this bridge will provide safe passage for many, this child will have a full life, this year will bring better things for schools, children and teachers.

This is the case with the dedication we have read about in 1 Kings 8. There is a hopeful mood though also a yearning for God's guidance and blessing. In truth, we have only read part of the story. This entire chapter, with 66 verses, describes the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon functions as priest gathering the elders, having the ark moved and lifting up prayers. It is a dedication like many in which we have participated. There are details that seem strange to us. This dedication takes place nearly 3,000 years ago. Yet there is much here that seems familiar and much that still speaks to us today.

One thing we see in this dedication is that while no physical space, even a majestic temple or sanctuary, can contain the fullness of the God who creates the whole world, space still matters, as does our gathering in it. And thus, it is appropriate to set aside time to dedicate such space.

It is important to note that Solomon does recognize the limits of physical space. “But will God indeed dwell on the earth?” he asks in our reading. “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” It is a shift from thinking that God’s presence is located in the ark, but before we become critical of previous Hebrew thought, we should acknowledge that Solomon expresses a broader perspective than many seem to live with to this day.

Whether we say so or not, many of us function as if God can only be met in this kind of holy space. God can only hear what we say here, and God can only speak through specific readings and music. The truth is we have no monopoly on God. God speaks through all of life and the whole of creation. Many people have discovered this or perhaps questioned whether God speaks here anymore. This is a part of why church attendance in this nation has dropped so dramatically even before COVID-19, though I am not convinced that all the people who say they can worship God anywhere are doing so. Perhaps God can be found in a sunrise at the beach or on a hike up a mountain, but I’m not so sure about on a golf course... though that may say more about my golf game.

But all kidding aside, our claim is not that this is the only place we can meet God, but that this is one place we seek to do so together, so that not only can we honor God and seek God’s counsel here, we can also train the eyes and ears of our souls to look and listen for God in other places. Nearly three thousand years ago, Solomon appreciates this distinction, yet he also realizes how important worship space still is. Thus, after all the time and wealth he invests in seeing that the temple is built, he sets aside time to dedicate it, to pray for God’s blessing on it.

Our forbearers did the same thing with this space when the church moved to this location. While regular services began here on September 11, 1859, the service of dedication took place on November 11, 1858. The Reverend Dr. J. L. Burrows of Richmond, Virginia, prayed that God might be honored here and revealed to the people who would gather. He

prayed that God's love in Christ might be known, that people might experience forgiveness and peace, that the weakened would find strength and all would find hope. He prayed for the nurture of children and that God's presence and power would be experienced. 163 years later we can attest to the fact that those prayers were not in vain.

But we not only learn from the ancient story that physical space matters and thus is worthy of dedication; we also learn something about what to pray for in worship space. If we examine the entire chapter, we see that Solomon's overarching concern is that the people remain connected to God and God to the people so that God will hear the people's prayers. Then, he lists specific concerns to be addressed over time within the space established for worship.

When people sin against each other, he hopes that forgiveness will be experienced, and when the nation turns away from God, he prays that they will be forgiven and return to their land. The latter is either an incredible premonition or the work of the Deuteronomic editor after the exile. Solomon also anticipates times of famine and various plagues, including great sickness — which seems quite familiar these days — hoping that the prayers offered in the temple will be heard by God in times of such need. In short, Solomon prays that people will bring their concerns to God in worship space and that God will hear their cries.

That is what we hope for and pray for in this space. The exact focus of our concern and celebration varies because the nature of life varies. But in any given time, there are things we are grateful for and things we are concerned about — here we share all of them with God, trusting that God hears us with understanding and compassion.

Today we have made space to focus on one specific realm of concern — the return of children, teachers and administrators to schools. This is a worthy concern to embrace in worship any year. So much is at stake in the education of children. So much work goes into shaping the learning experience. So much good happens, almost routinely, that we take for granted the devotion and perseverance of teachers which benefits the one thing that is more precious to us than anything else in life — our children. This always deserves our prayerful attention, but

this year, with all the added risks and challenges created by a pandemic, all the hopes and fears, this really deserves our prayerful attention.

This space in which we worship houses many rituals of blessing and the space itself is important enough to justify times of dedication and rededication. What we pray for is the kind of hope and healing we all desperately need to be experienced in each new generation.

There is at least one other thing we learn from our story in 1 Kings, and it is included in the verses we have read. After expressing many hopes and prayers for his people over the years, King Solomon says this. “Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name — for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm — when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you...” Solomon prays not just for his people but for all people. The temple is not just for Israel but for all who seek God, even the foreigner.

The Hebrew word here — *nokri* — is not the word for a protected alien living in the land, nor does the word refer to a fugitive from a blood-revenge. This word describes the outsider who has come because of an interest in the worship of Yahweh. Everyone who has such an interest, says Solomon, is welcome, and he wants God to hear them. It is quite a statement of inclusion for any leader of any time to make.

The message for us is that if we view our faith to be in line with the biblical story — beginning with ancient Israel and moving through the life and ministry of Jesus all the way to the experience of the early church — our worship space must be a house of prayer for all people, not just people of our nation, race, class, gender or anything else.

While this may seem obvious, in my lifetime alone, churches in our culture have had all sorts of debates about who is and is not welcome in any given church. A little over thirty years ago, a church in Warren County voted not to embrace a teenager who made a profession of faith because she was the child of an interracial marriage. Our church voted not to accept a new member in the 1960s because he was black before we finally overcame this sinful ignorance and reintegrated.

A church that homiletics professor Fred Craddock pastored as a young minister in Tennessee refused to welcome newcomers who lived in a trailer park because they “weren’t the right kind of people” — that church later died because it ran out of “the right kind of people.” More recently churches have formally refused to welcome LGBT people and informally made it difficult for people with life challenges — the blind, the hearing impaired, those confined to a wheel chair — to feel welcome. I mean — how welcome are you if you cannot get into a building or room, use a restroom or hear anything that is going on?

The irony of all of our conversations and debates about welcome, at least according to the biblical witness, is that we are assuming a responsibility that isn’t ours. This house isn’t ours, no matter what any legal document says. This house belongs to God, and God already has decided who is welcome here — everyone! Saints and sinners, insiders and outcasts, people of all shapes and sizes and colors — everyone is welcomed by God! So, who are we to turn anyone away? Who are we to debate who is worthy? None of us is worthy, yet all are welcome.

Singer/songwriter Harry Chapin, who wrote most of the music for *Cotton Patch Gospel*, yet was an agnostic most of his life, once said this. “If there is a God, it must be a God who recognizes our weaknesses and then hugs us (*Harry Chapin: The Music Behind the Man*, Michael Francis Taylor, pp. 293-294).” Solomon might well agree. Jesus certainly would.

I sometimes think back to that dedication in 1858. No one present, including the minister who prayed, could have envisioned all that has taken place in the world, all that has affected this church, from that time until ours. But those people did know they could trust the God who had carried them to that point to guide and strengthen this church, and they believed that a good bit of this guidance and strength would be found right here. They were right, and we too can trust in God, we too can believe that God will meet us here — not only here, but certainly here — and we are grateful for this reality.