

“Building Sanctuaries”

Mark 6:30-34,53-56 and Ephesians 2:11-22

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+6:30-34;53-56)

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+2:11-22)

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July 5, 2009

Where God is present a sanctuary exists.

"A woman spoke quietly of the death of her father. He had been a proud man, she said, a man who spent all his work days tilling the soil of a Carolina farm and his entire Sabbath's praising God for life and seed and family. A final bout with cancer sent him to the hospital never to come home again, and in the last week of his life the disease provided the added indignity of a stroke that had robbed him of his speech. As his family visited his bedside, his eyes would moisten with frustration and grief as he tried in vain to speak to these people he loved so dearly.

"On his last day alive, the attending physician had issued the signal, the family had gathered in his room - the daughter and her two brothers. With strength fading, the father motioned to his son that he wanted a glass of water. The son hastened to the sink and returned with a full water glass, which he held toward his father's lips. But the old man pushed the glass away and moved his finger from the glass toward his son, as if to say, 'You drink it.'

"Hesitant and uncertain, the son lifted the glass to his lips and drank from it. Then the father motioned toward his daughter, indicating that she should drink some, too. Sensing what his father wanted, the son passed the glass to his sister, and she drank. Now the father pointed toward the other son and the daughter realized what was happening.

"'He is serving communion,' she gasped.

"There in the face of death, this father summoned a sacramental water glass to administer the feast of life. There is a wordless act of worship, the promise of the resurrection came home." (Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1995)

A statement of hope given in the face of death comes at a point where a Christian community shares communion in a sacred place—a Sanctuary. The Sanctuary in this event is a hospital room. A Sanctuary can be around a kitchen table, in a living room, in the quiet corner of a local restaurant, or anyplace else where God's Spirit is active and people are safe to share their innermost selves. Seven days a week, James Moore is up before the sun and off to work at a junkyard on the city's South Side. On Sunday mornings, he also attends church there.

For the last four years, Mr. Moore and about a dozen other worshipers have held services in the junkyard. They gather under open sky, alongside the shattered glass, broken dreams. "Everybody needs to feed their soul," says Erma House, one of the regular worshipers. "It don't matter where, just as long as you do it."

My friends, building Sanctuaries is what we Christians need to be about. You of course realize that I am not talking about bricks and mortar. King David in *II Samuel 7* (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ii+samuel+7) becomes convinced that he should build a sanctuary for the Lord. The word comes back to him to invest his time and energy in building up the people of God and leave the hoisting of one stone upon another to his son. At Chilson Hills during the time that we were building a larger sanctuary for worship, we were not side tracked that our primary mission is to build up God's people who will be sanctuaries throughout this region.

Because we are so attached to understanding the word sanctuary as related to bricks and mortar, I want to spend some time defining for us the true nature of a sanctuary of the living God.

A sanctuary is a community of people who are so closely connected to God's Spirit that there are no dividing walls between them.

A community of people!

In Mark's gospel we find Jesus sending out his disciples in groups of two. When they return, tired from a time of ministry with people, Jesus determines to take them away for rest and reflection. Jesus is investing his time in building a small community of people. Yes, Jesus does the public things, healing and teaching. But, the power is shared and the transformation of lives happens in the community of people known today as the disciples. Jesus' emphasis is upon building up a community of God's people to be sanctuaries for the world. Let us carefully note that Jesus only chose twelve people for his first sanctuary. There may be symbolic reasons for this number, but there are also practical reasons. One person can only lead, guide, teach, and support about twelve people. We know that what happened after Jesus' resurrection was the explosion of small covenant communities of God's people all around the then known world led by those twelve who began sanctuaries of God's people to celebrate Christ's resurrection.

Jesus knew and continues to teach us now that healing, personal transformation, and spiritual growth happen most often in a covenant community of God's people living and building sanctuaries.

Who are so closely connected to God's Spirit!

We cannot build sanctuaries by ourselves. Nothing we do or say can create a Holy place where the Spirit of God can be encountered. Building sanctuaries is the work of worship and prayer. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is doing all that he can do to take his disciples aside for an extended time of prayer. Prayer of this kind is a healthy refreshment. It is not a have to, need to, got to, but it is a want to form of prayer. A community united in prayer is a group of people living connected to the transforming power of the Living God.

In the mid 1960's a great wave of enthusiasm crested in the action of working for the poor and the disposed of our society. Many people went into careers of social work, counseling, and teaching. This great movement of idealism was based in the desire to change the world and make it better.

By the mid 1970's another shift occurred. These youth saw the futility of trying to change anything in the system and decided that the only sane course for them was to take care of themselves. The "Me" generation was born.

What happened? How could the great wave of generosity and self sacrifice so quickly move out to sea again? Less than a decade and it was gone. Much has been written about this phenomena. At least for church people, the assessment is clear that the move into missions was excellent. However, that move did not have the strength to endure because it rejected the worship and prayer resources of the church.

Living in a covenant community where we participate in the pain of others, acknowledge our sin and seek forgiveness, grow through the challenges of our friends, and much more is not easy. We can only build up sanctuaries of God's people for the sake of the world if we are thoroughly rooted and grounded in the worship and prayer life of a healthy Christian. This is why no matter where you are, the foundation for all building of God's covenant community is prayer. In an African village privacy is impossible. Therefore, a convert who wishes to pray, retires to the forest. A convert may grow careless and neglect the place of prayer. But when the community gathers, the convert is asked, "Is the grass green on your path?" Or to put it another way, "Are you keeping your covenant alive?"

In covenant community prayer the connection to the Holy Spirit is real and personal. "Pray for the conflict between my husband and me." "Pray for guidance because I might lose my job." "Pray for me as I struggle with my greed." Such requests and more are a part of the prayer life of one of God's communities that is building up a sanctuary. Remember:

A sanctuary is a community of people who are so closely connected the Holy Spirit...that there are no dividing walls between them!

In ***Ephesians 2*** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=ephesians+2), the Apostle Paul is writing to gentile people describing what their life was like before Christ. Paul reminds them that they were not a part of God's family. They were considered unclean. They were unacceptable and without hope. However, through the grace and love of Jesus Christ, they became members of a covenant community where "the dividing wall of hostility" is removed by Christ. The Apostle Paul is speaking honestly and forthrightly about the nature of a Christian community. It has no dividing walls.

My goodness, we in the American church have enough dividing walls to subdivide the Sears Tower. We divide ourselves over economics, education, money, politics, sex, proper addresses, appropriate dress, manners, cleanliness, national affiliation, sports teams, the color of our skins, the style of our music, even whether we hold up our hands in worship or not, and I have not even touched theology yet. We divide ourselves over pre-, post-, or millennial thinking. We build barriers over right doctrine, proper Biblical interpretation, and sound theology. And, I have just begun.

I sometimes ponder what Jesus thinks when he observes His Church. Jesus prayed for our unity. We have self-righteously thumbed our nose in His face. Jesus taught and lived sacrificial love. We have created a religious industry that keeps most of the money given to God just to oil the machinery. Jesus asked over and over again not to proclaim Him publicly and make a big show. We are addicted to bigger is better so Jesus' name is used to sell products as well as productions.

Because we are so far off from where Jesus meant for us to be, I think it is time to come back to the basics. Christ's desire is for us to build up sanctuaries where people can be transformed into the healthy, vibrant people God created them to be.

In an address to Albania's Evangelical Alliance on March 23, 1997, the speaker confessed these words. "A man once said: 'I've been looking for my enemy for many years, and have finally found him: he is me.' The situation in Albania starts in our own heart. Pyramid schemes, anarchy and corruption are only the consequences. We have to address the root of the problem, but have been fighting unrighteousness with unrighteousness. That's like trying to put out fires with gas."

"God has given us wonderful promises for the healing of our country, but there are conditions to be fulfilled: humility, prayer and repentance of our own sins.

"That's hard for our egos to accept. Cursing has become a national epidemic. 'Father in heaven, forgive us. Father, help us to find true peace. Help us to turn our curses into blessings. Let us begin a campaign of blessing.' May the Lord God give you this hope."

My friends, Jesus is calling us to build sanctuaries all over our region. Where there is a need for healing, let us build a sanctuary. Where people hurt for any reason, let us build a sanctuary. Where people are imprisoned, without sight, lost, let us build sanctuaries. Let's get back to basics and follow Jesus' example.