

A Temple Within – based on Luke 21:5-19
Aspen Community UMC
November 18, 2007

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It was a busy week for Jesus and the disciples in Jerusalem.
Someone spoke about how beautiful the place was. And, it was.

This was the third temple. Solomon built the first temple.

That one was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

When the Jews returned from captivity they built a second temple.
Although remarkable, it was nothing to compare with the first temple.

Herod tore that one down to make room for his own.

This one had been under construction for some forty years now.

It was right up there on the side of the mountain.

The historian Josephus writes that the temple was about 150 feet wide
and about the height of a 15-story building.

He also wrote about the huge white stones.

Many of these huge white marble stones
were even overlaid with massive plates of gold
that radiated across the city when the sun came up in the morning.

The furnishings were as lavish as the building itself, we are told.
And, when one looked up at the temple, the white marble caused it almost
to look like the mountain had snow on it.

It must have been a feast for the eyes.

It was a sacred place to look at, and surely it felt sacred to be there.

Perhaps worship is easier when there is a temple.

Perhaps believing is easier when there is a temple.

Then we can go and enter into it, and go through the actions of worship.

And, feel more like we have been in connection – as far as we know it.

There is a certain security in having a temple,
a place to go to think about those things - a kind of security in thinking that

“God is in his heaven and all is right with the world.”

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Our human tendency is to label some places, some people, and some events as more sacred or spiritual than others.¹

That was the case with the temple.

When I began to study this passage a few days ago,
I thought of a piece written by Dennis Merritt Jones called
"The Sacred Includes You."²

Jones was writing about a spiritual retreat he had recently returned from
at a conference center located
at the tip of the Monterrey Peninsula in California.

He wrote that it was without question one of the most breathtaking spots
he had ever been – and he had been there many times.

He talked about a kind of sacredness to the place
with the ocean, the wildlife, the trees.

He said he could actually feel the presence of God oozing through all of it.

Even the people seemed to ooze God.

Have you ever been anywhere that just seemed to ooze God?

Prior to leaving, Jones remembered standing on the back deck of the very
room in which he had stayed before -
and he thought about the timelessness of the place -
and that it was as beautiful and sacred as it was the first time he had been there.

But then he heard his own little small voice
say to him that something had changed. He had changed.
What had changed was not the space, the building, the conference center.

The place had always felt sacred.

He was now aware that he was sacred.

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He knew that he could not ever be more or less sacred in God's eyes -
And he thought more about life itself as a sacred experience.
That we cannot become more spiritual than we are wherever we are.
We are already 100% spirit.

For him it was a moment of awakening to a truth.
We don't have to go somewhere like that to know this –
or be in the temple - where Jesus and the disciples were that day.
Now, it may be easier to learn about and remember our connectedness to God
while in a breathtaking kind of setting.
But the opportunity to live into it,
comes when we get home from places like it.
Jones calls it "camp consciousness."

Remember coming home from camp as a child, or from a spiritual retreat?

Anyone here been to the Academy for Spiritual Development
sponsored by the Upper Room of the United Methodist Church?

There are places we go to seek out those experiences -
often before we ever realize that we are spiritual experiences.

Actually, our everyday ordinary lives can be transformed
into a spiritual experience
simply by remembering to remember that there can be no more of God
at a church, or a retreat center, or a camp, or a temple,
than on Interstate 70 on a Sunday afternoon anytime of year.

Walter Starcke says, "It's all God...so love it all."

That is part of what Jesus was getting at that day while they admired the temple,
while they were enjoying the view, and the feel of that sacred space.

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Jesus responded to someone's comment about its beauty saying that the day would come when not one stone will be left upon another. Perhaps he was saying, "My friends, this beauty is not what it is all about."

As amazing as the temple was -
with its fine stonework, its inlaid gold, its lavish furnishings -
it was only a façade – and that was not a bad thing.
It was a covering that represented what was inside.
In ancient times, Yahweh, the divine was thought to be within the temple,
or tent as it would have been a long, long time ago.
But now, the temple could and would fall. It would be a pile of rubble.

And, life itself will testify to a parallel experience
of trudging over and into and through the rocks -
stumbling and falling and picking ourselves up –
having to reorient ourselves to new realities -
and sometimes discovering amazing moments of rebirth and new life -
that by nature seem to accompany a journey through the rubble-
of some part of our life. Ever been there?

There is sometimes beauty in the rubble that we don't see
until we have been there.
The rubble may be where we find hope for the next leg of our journey.
That may be where we find the purpose and the drive
to create and activate new things in our lives.

And that takes us to another place in our thinking about temples.

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And that place is the spiritual, the mystery schools that survived and flourished
in the next several centuries and as history progressed.
This was where students learned to see the temple as internal.

The temple, is also our body, mind, and spirit.

Paul introduced that idea to persons
who became followers of Jesus some years later.

We have that opportunity – all of us –
to build that most holy of holies within our own hearts.

What wisdom is there for us in this over 100 year old church?
It can remind us that the purpose of the structure is to contain
and provide a place for worship and learning and change
for the people who come here.

We hope this place holds a vitality
that can only be described as the presence of the Holy Spirit -
because of what happens in our lives.

Someday this building will no longer be.
It may be several hundred years. We have no way of knowing.

But while it is here, it will be a place of Spirit,
a place where we observe beauty,
but, even more, because of our experience here
hopefully we will have been willing to look deeply
within the temples of our hearts and bodies,
and find the God who calls us to something more.

The temple on the outside
is just the reminder of the temple on the inside – the temple within.
The course of our lives will give us both the building up and the tearing down,
that will bring rubble from time to time that needs clearing away.

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And because of that,
the memory of Jesus' words to his disciples that
no stone will be left unturned,
can testify to us that
the temple on the mountain and the temple within us
reflect one another.

And, we can learn something in wading through the rubble
of temples or any structures for that matter,
and we can learn to walk more courageously,
and hopefully, for what we may find in the future.

It is a little like the stories, and there are many of them,
of surprising survivals after destruction -
like finding the wet and bedraggled kitten
under the rubble after a tornado -
who comes out meowing
as a sign of hope to a family who just lost their home.

We saw picture after picture of this kind of destruction after Hurricane Katrina.
The kitten crawling out from under lumber and bricks
is a sign of amazing hope.

Sometimes there is rubble and possibility at the same time.

And, in the midst of the destruction, hope and opportunity emerges.
And it may have been a kind of hope that could never have emerged
out of an intact temple, or church, or retreat center, or a home, or human being.

Destruction can be a terrible thing, but good can come of it.
Amazing things can come of it. Hope can come of it.
It does seem to sharpen our ability to find meaning
and to make meaning out of things.

And perhaps, Jesus wanted to help those around him
come closer to the God he knew so closely and clearly -
who was not housed in a temple.

So, he told them not to depend on the temple.
That there was something more meaningful inside them
and to rely on that,
and to rely on the presence of the divine to lead them on
when the temple was no longer there.

You see, temples come and temples go.
They can be beautiful and we can enjoy and be inspired when we visit them.
But no ultimate beauty resides in them – no ultimate strength.
The beauty resides somewhere in the rubble and the ripple of life
like precious stones being quarried and polished.
Sometimes we are the precious stones being quarried and polished.
The rubble may be where we find hope for the next leg of our journey.
It may be where we find the purpose and the drive
to create new things in our lives.

I believe this was what Jesus was teaching that day.
It is not a new idea for us by any stretch,
but it is something we forget from time to time.
He was teaching important things in those final weeks of his life.
May they also be important to us.

¹ Dennis Merritt Jones. The Art of Being: 101 Ways to Practice Purpose in Your Life. p. 178.

² Ibid.