

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 23, 2015  
Proper 16, Year B, Track 1  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church

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Solomon prayed to God, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love this building. This English gothic style is my favorite kind of church building. It makes me feel connected to our rich legacy to twenty centuries of Christian worship, to the riches of the medieval church, and to our special Anglican approach to our faith and thought. We are about to undertake a capital campaign to raise money to keep this building in good repair for future generations.

But why do we need such an expensive building? God is everywhere. We can pray to God any place at any time. Is having a building like this merely part of a tradition that is as outdated as the dodo? King Solomon addressed this question roughly 2,900 years ago. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" So here is my response.

Human beings seem to be hardwired to set aside holy places. Every human society and religion has done so. It's in our DNA. God seems to have built into us a need and hunger for places where we can feel close to the divine, places where the wall between this world and the other world is thin and permeable, places where we can experience the numinous. Druids had their sacred groves. Greeks had their temples. The Shinto make their shrines on every mountain top. Muslims build mosques. And we Christians build our churches.

Notice that Solomon never claims that God will dwell in the Temple, only that God's name will be there. He prays, "Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive." So while God is everywhere and no building can contain the divine transcendence, such holy places are where we can communicate with God perhaps more easily than other places. Our prayers are somehow amplified. Our spiritual vision is enhanced. These sacred spaces are like enormous phone booths.

Even when we cannot be in the Temple, we can "pray towards the temple." This is what Daniel was doing in Babylon when he got into trouble with the emperor and got himself thrown into the lions' den. Even when we cannot be in the building, it can still be a focus for our devotion and prayer. The tradition of tolling a bell before services in a parish church in England began as a way to let those working in the fields or in the town know that worship was happening in the parish church, prayers were ascending to heaven, the Word of God was being read all on behalf of those whose other duties prevented them from being there.

Furthermore, there is a welcoming, universal understanding. "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 so that all the peoples of the

earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built." This temple is open to all people, not just the descendants of Abraham. Moreover, is a place where non-Jews may learn about God. This is an edifice that edifies.

As for this building of St. Michael's that we love, what we have said of Solomon's Temple we can say of this place as well. While it cannot contain all of God, it is a holy space. It is a place made holy by all the prayers and praises said and sung between these walls for close to a hundred years. God is present here in the sacrament reserved in the aumbry before which the light of the Presence burns day and night. God is present here in the music and prayers and rituals performed here. God is present here in the silent peace through all the other hours of the week.

This building and its holy space is available to everyone who lives in and near Litchfield and to the visitor and those passing through. Anyone can pray towards this place any time. Anyone seeing the massive tower and the solid stone of its walls can know of a little of God's eternity and dependability. Anyone may enter it and feel the love of God. Anyone can join us for worship and receive a taste of the Kingdom. Anyone who hears the bell tolls can know that we are here praising God and praying for the welfare of the world.

This building is an edifice that edifies and shows people a little of what God is like and what the story of salvation is. In the stories depicted in the stained glass we see important parts of the Scripture. The painting at the high altar shows the risen Lord and his presence among us at the Eucharist. The tiles on the floor speak of the virtues that work to conform us to the image of Christ. The floor plan is in the form of a cross and the choir and nave represent heaven and earth and how they are connected by the Incarnation.

This building is far more than simply a place for people to gather. It is itself a sacrament—imperfect, partial, yet still true and trustworthy—a sacrament of the presence of God and of the love of God. Like all sacraments it is a symbol that does what it symbolizes: joins heaven to earth; allow God and us to commune with each other. This is far more than our building. It belongs to all who have worshiped here in the past and those who will come after us. It ministers to all dwell in this town and its environs. The mission of this church building is to help all who are not members know a little of what God offers us all, to feel the pull of the divine wooing.

This building is not an idol; it is a sacrament. It is necessary to our health and vitality as a living community of Christ. It is a holy place. Let us honor it as best we can.