

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
18 July 2021 (proper 16)
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St. Paul's Cathedral in London used to dominate the cityscape—and still does from certain vantage points. But there is growing concern that even these views will be compromised by the burgeoning array of tall, dramatic skyscrapers being erected in the vicinity. Consequently, the cathedral, a symbol of the city which reminds it of certain values, will be overshadowed by other symbols which embody other, antithetical, values.

Of course the church isn't a building; it's people. Yet we only become the Church when we come together in churches. In other words, only *in* church do we learn what it is to *be* church, for church isn't a building any more than it's an idea. It's an experience: the experience of getting phone calls or emails from people you don't really know, aside from seeing them in the pew, but who, knowing you're going through a time of crisis and uncertainty, thought they should check in; the experience of being truly welcomed and accepted by people who have never laid eyes on you and know nothing about your personal journey, your struggles, your isolation, but who have pledged to welcome all people as Christ; the experience of helping those who are less fortunate for no other reason than the fact you've been awakened to their precious Christ-like humanity and have discovered joy in serving others.

For the last year and a half, all of us have missed being able to be together as a community of faith. Online worship, while necessary and important, just isn't the *same*. Your living room probably lacks what the French would call *ambiance mystique* and your computer screen is no substitute for a pulpit—or lectern. It's hard to do church without all of these trappings. Impossible, even.

But of course the most important trappings—if that's the word—aren't the pews, and memorial tablets, and pulpits, and organs, and altars. They're faces. If we've learned nothing else during this pandemic, we've at least learned this. Yes: sacred space is important. But even more important are the souls who make that space come alive through the power of the Spirit.

In our first reading this morning, we heard a story about David, who has built himself a beautiful and sumptuous house of cedar. And he's feeling guilty that he's left God to make do with a measly tent. The prophet Nathan, sensing David's guilt, encourages him to do something spectacular. But God tells Nathan to tell David not to bother. "Tell him," God says,

that I've never once complained that I've been travelling around in a tent.
I don't need a fabulous house to dwell in. In fact, I will make David's

dynasty great, and his offspring will become great and *they* will be my household, my dwelling and my glory.

There's another reading appointed for this Sunday—we only use two of the three in these online services—which is from Ephesians. In it, the writer tells his readers that they have been made members of the household of God, and that in Jesus, “...the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” This is an image of the Church which is made up of people from all walks of life who have been brought together through Christ's death, a death so powerful that it is able to break through the barriers we erect to keep ourselves from being tainted by “the other.”

You and I now know what it's like to live at a time when our vision of what our communities should be is being crowded out by things which threaten to make us we lose sight of our core values. So the questions we must grapple with are: Do we simply accept this state of affairs and even participate in building systems which are neither fair nor godly? Do we endeavour to build even more dividing walls that prevent us from seeing and knowing anyone who isn't like us? Do we so embrace the priorities of today that we lose the promise of eternity?

Or does the idea of helping to build the living temple of God inspire us so much that we will strive to look beyond the distractions to what really matters? Will we be brave enough to scale the dividing wall, begin to dismantle it, and extend a hand in friendship? Can we open ourselves to new ways of living so that eternal values break in?

The choice is ours. But the call is God's. He has called you and me to build in this place, at this time, a temple that embodies his beauty, his justice, and his peace. He has called us to be his agents in the world, to become part of his team of builders who build not according to the world's designs but according to God's promise. He has called us not to build on the shifting sands of suspicion and exclusivity but on the great and unshakable foundation of Christ's all-encompassing love.

Of course it's easier to continue to lavish time and energy on the crass monuments of our own devising, which become shameful blasphemies when we claim we are working for God's glory. But the thing is, if we continue to hammer away on our own, questions will begin to hammer ever louder in our ears: Are we truly happy? Is this how we intend to spend our lives? Can fear and selfishness build anything compelling and beautiful?

Inside St. Paul's there is an inscription on a tablet memorializing the building's architect, Sir Christopher Wren. It says, in Latin, *Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you.* And if *you* seek God's monument, look around you. Look at the faces of the children of God, faces like yours and unlike yours; faces familiar and strange; faces young and old—and see that we are all precious living stones of God's handiwork. Look at yourself and behold how he has hewn you from the cold rock of doubt and

despair and death, freeing you to truly live. Look at it all and see the dwelling place of God: a vast united family liberated, loved, and lifted into his eternal life.