

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 8.23.15

Scripture: 1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43
John 6:56-69

A friend posted an announcement on her Facebook wall. A house in Berkeley, California was looking for two new residents as it had two rooms open up in this, an intentional community.

The name of community is Wysdym Yrth, which is spelled with all “y”s. The house is described as a “...three story Victorian with five bedrooms, two baths, kitchen, dining room, common area, garden, and dungeon. We have water, electricity, gas, Wi-Fi, and the just comfort of the righteous. What we DON’T have at Wysdym Yrth is a television, radio, microwave, doors, or passive aggressive communication, vis-a-vis ‘notes.’”

Getting more detailed now, the announcement continues, “Our intentional community is fragrance free. We do not allow scented candles, oils, detergents, soaps, lotions, perfumes, deodorants, shampoos, gels, lubricants, or foods. Our household does not support products that have been tested. We doubt that our home would be a good fit for those who indulge in occasional recreational use of hard drugs, prescription pharmaceuticals, alcohol, aspirin, or bread.”

If you’re beginning to suspect this is a joke, you wouldn’t be wrong.

As for its current residents, there are four. “Lana is a female-bodied atmospherist. Trudeau is a male-bodied, gender-fluid, film-making radical snacktivist. Robyn is a female-bodied former navy seal, escaped inmate of a Soviet prison camp, and corporate headhunter with the taxidermy to prove it.” Then there’s “Rū [who] does not believe in labels, pronouns, adverbs, or prepositions.”

And finally, what you should be if you seek residence there: “Applicants should be easygoing individuals. We’re not looking for someone exactly like us, just someone we can like—shall we say a fellow conspirator?—who also knows how to cook, juice, render a steer into soap, non-lethally restrain a monitor lizard, and who has a strict attention to cleanliness, a spartan daily regimen, contempt for dissent, and less than 4% body fat. S/He should be prepared to have a quarter bounced off them at any moment. We will be testing.”

It made me laugh—this post did. It spurred a response from me: “I wonder if Robyn has begun to feel homesick for the Soviet prison camp, what with the housing so much less oppressive and ideologically determined.”

Then I scrolled on.

But when I read the scripture readings for this morning, I thought of it again—the house that Wysym Yrth built. I thought of the efforts we go to in building a home for ourselves. I wondered at what we mean for our homes to contain and nurture and express. Satire has a way of bringing such concerns into full relief.

As it happens, so does scripture.

Solomon built the house of God, and in so doing followed at least as many detailed instructions as the Wysym Yrth folks (fake as they are) had in mind.

Where we are in the story is following David’s kingship, so around the mid-900s before Christ. The people were now a settled nation. After generations of enslavement in Egypt, after decades of homeless wandering in the wilderness—a refugee tribe ever on the move, after settling in the land of Canaan and fighting decades of wars with neighboring nations to lay such claim, the people were ready for some permanence, some stability.

They were also hopeful that God might come to stay, that this God who lead them and stayed with them in their wandering might now settle where they would settle. They even had the Ark of the Covenant back. An ornate container that they carried with them wherever they went, the Ark had been lost in battle to the Philistines. But bad fortune had befallen the Philistines for the discreet time that they had the Ark. So everyone understood this bad fortune to be God’s acting in protest that they had it at all. They surrendered it back to the Israelites, then, back to David. It had been in Jerusalem, and now it was in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the inner sanctuary of this new Temple.

This wasn’t meant to imprison God; this was meant out of respect, out of honor and even fear. But it is funny that what had long contented God (the people understood)—that is, a sort of raw immediacy—was now eschewed for something more royal and exalted and far less accessible.

You know, they don’t call them “trappings” for nothing.

Solomon apparently wasn't so sure. Though he'd built this house, he wasn't sure it would achieve its purpose. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?" he asked at the dedication. Of course, he asked it just after the Ark was secured inside, at which time a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

That must have come as a huge relief to Solomon. I'm sure the stakes were high for him. After all, his father had wanted to build the Temple, had moreover purchased the land that would be the Temple site and had amassed the materials to make it happen. But it was denied him, according to the story, because he was a soldier. David wouldn't be the one to oversee such a grand and glorious building project because, as the Lord explained, David was a man of war. Solomon, though, David's son: he was a man of wisdom. Now, whether that was a fact of his character or a reflection of his times or the accident of his birth into royalty and privilege, Solomon wasn't a warrior, he was wise and he was wealthy. What's more, there was little else to do in order to secure a legacy for himself—just keep the borders secure, keep the people safe and fed, and now build a Temple.

It cuts both ways, you know. To have a Temple means to have security and a sense of the future, but it also means establishing a priesthood and a social hierarchy by which some have greater access to power than others, by which there would be haves and have-nots. It means living in such a way that's not so raw and close to the bone, even survival-driven; instead living in such a way that involves planning, and delaying gratification, but also perhaps storing up, even hoarding. Hand-to-mouth can be brutal, can court injustice. But so can settled living in a land of abundance.

So it began, this huge building project, which involved foreign laborers and a tremendous amount of raw material, and was so expensive that Solomon had to trade twenty cities in Galilee to the neighboring king to raise cash for supplies.

And so it was filled and fulfilled—this huge building project that, though it would not and could not *contain* God, would anyway represent God on the earth, and for all people, Israelites and foreigners. That was Solomon's prayer, that any and all (Israelites and foreigners) who came to this place might be heard by God and blessed by God, and might know God's name so to do God's good will.

I like that Solomon was wise to what we also know—that God isn't so easily contained, that God isn't so parochial and provincial as to take up residence in but one particular place (and one of our choosing). No, the God of Israel is ever moving out of our perceiving and our containing. This God doesn't guard the fences we build around ourselves and people like us. This God doesn't keep watch of the walls that we build for our own sense of security and righteousness. This God is always, while also within those fences and walls, more pressingly, just beyond them. Indeed, that's how we came to be a part of this at all—none of us here strictly of the people Israel, all of us here coming into this grand family through more mongrelous and boundary-breaking means.

You might have noticed that we have yet another reading from the gospel of John wherein Jesus likens himself to bread. He is the bread of life. He is the manna from heaven, but whoever eats of this manna won't be hungry again tomorrow. It's the fifth, and I'm pleased to say final, reading in this regard. But, even though Jesus went on in this vein at some length and for some time, many who heard it yet found it difficult, unacceptable.

And who can blame them? It's a troubling assertion, especially amidst a people who followed strict dietary laws. But, of course, the notion that "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood" is troubling even among omnivores, when you really think about it. So who can blame the disciples—these who, having followed until now, at this turned back and no longer followed him? Really, even Peter seems to sympathize. Notice that his reason for staying is as much because he has nowhere else to go than because he trusts Jesus. Look, when Jesus asked the twelve disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go?" It was this, or nothing at all.

I can relate to this, in a certain sense. There are things that I've gotten myself hooked on that I simply can't let go, even though I'm not so sure they're true or good or going to pay off. I have a short story I wrote that, though others have read it and told me, "No, you can't you do that; as a writer, you can't do that," I still believe in and tinker with from time to time and send out to literary journals. It's at *Glimmer Train* now. We'll see.

There's also this, at the risk of sounding overly pious. I sometimes come to this crossroads as regards Jesus and church and the gospel and this whole thing. "Really?" I'll ask myself. "Do I really believe all this? Is this really how I'm gonna spend my life, holding out hope that love wins, preaching that it does and will, watching for evidence of this bold (perhaps absurd) assertion—that death is not the end, that life is victorious, and that redemption is real such that nothing is forgotten or let to waste but that everything coheres and fulfills its purpose and overflows with significance? Is this really where I'm laying down stakes? Why not just go into advertising? That's what everyone assumed I'd do with my B.A. in English."

But then I think of all the ways that the gospel *has* born true—in my life, and in the history of life as far as I'm aware of it—and I think, what else can I do?

Well, there's secularism, that which consigns as fantasy or falsehood anything beckoning from beyond what is tangible and prove-able. But I believe in secularism even less than I believe in the most out-there claims of the Christian faith and tradition. That there is nothing beyond the known and to-be-known world? That's a most closed-down claim, and it's often uttered by people who are *smart*, who *know* things. It bewilders me. Plus, to believe in secularism is to put all trust in the ultimacy of the state, which is something I simply cannot do.

So, shall I go with capitalism, that which determines the value of things in a marketplace of buying and selling? A sofa is worth more than a chair. A purebred puppy is worth more than a pound-dog. A CEO is worth more than the janitor who cleans his office. The labor of men is more to be valued than the labor of women. It's absurd. It's offensive. It also has its usefulness. Consider that a bank established in an otherwise broken-down civilization has the potential to bring that civilization back the brink. People can now save what they earn, and plan for the future. For all the good and bad of it, it's most truly this—provisional, here for a time and some of that time making life more free and fair.

So, shall I go with this form of government or that form of government, with this ideology or that ideology? Or shall I just do what so many of my sort do—put all my faith and hope in my family-tribe, lay out all my resources for my children that they might "get ahead." (I hate it when my people say that because it dodges the

plain fact that for my children to “get ahead” is to leave other children behind, even far behind, and I’m not a willing participant in that social dynamic of dog-eat-dog, or kid-eat-eat. [*Hunger Games* anyone? Not that I’ve seen it. Not that I could. Too scary.]

I can’t do any of those things. I can’t go with any of those things. Too brutal, too untrue, none has stood the test of time but the Living God and His Christ and His creation whose laws are immutable and so organize a realm where love is most imperatively to be manifest, for only by love will all the crowded and competitive urges toward life be fulfilled so that life might abound, full and rich and free.

No, I simply have to stay with Christ. Or, to put it as “John,” our gospel writer puts it, I simply have to abide with Christ and hope that he comes to abide in me. As the Father abides in Jesus and Jesus in the Father, so I hope I will abide in Jesus and he will abide in me.

Sound familiar? It was Solomon’s hope and prayer. It’s what Solomon hoped for the Temple he built—that God would come to dwell not only on earth but in this house that he had built. That Jesus, according to John, means for each person to be such a Temple, such a place where God has come to dwell, only reaffirms that ancient understanding of God manifest—in a people, in each person.

We are each to be the place where God has come to dwell. And we are urged to build sheltering places where God might also come to dwell. To be certain, though they’ll have the appearance of permanence, they’ll be impermanent, but they’ll serve for a time.

So what, I wonder, does your house say about you?

I struggle with this question all the time. Here’s what I aim for mine to say about me. I want it to be a place of orderliness and regularity. (As I clean it, I often think of the line from the hymn we sang just last week: “...and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.”) Rooms have their purpose and time has its dictates. We sleep at night in the rooms where the beds are. We eat at mealtime in the room where the big table is. I write on Fridays in the front corner of the living room—a single chair and side table and lamp. We play in the basement and back yard when we have free time (and it’s not too buggy). Such regularity and orderliness

(which is different from fussiness; Wysdym Yrth, I'm looking at you) I think can make people thrive, which is what I hope for everyone who comes to live here or stay here and just stop in here.

You know, it isn't too different from what I hope for as regards this house. In fact, I think much of what I learned and believe makes a home I actually learned in church. The orderliness and regularity, but also the usefulness and unfussiness; the beauty "just because" but without being showy or enviable or triumphal; the formalism that reminds you this isn't just any old place, but the familiar that eases the worry that "maybe I shouldn't do that or sit here or touch that": this is your home, this is our home, and also it's not quite, not entirely for mostly it belongs to God. Though entrusted to each of us and all us, this is most truly God's home.

But will God indeed dwell on earth? Even heaven and earth cannot contain God, much less this house that we've built and maintain. But we pray anyway: "O Lord our God, heed the cry and the prayer that we pray today—that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, that your name shall be here, and that all—even those who have come from distant lands—might find a welcome and your presence here."

A couple weeks ago, one such visitor had this sort of experience. Semi-regular in the summertime, this person gave \$10,000 to our capital campaign. \$10,000. That's twice as big a gift as the now second-largest donation. We've received two \$5000 gifts.

I realize it's risky to mention amounts. I know people have different amounts of money to give to efforts like our capital campaign. We're "widow's mite" people who hold in mind that a penny from a poor widow is as great a gift as \$100 from a rich man—as great and perhaps greater. Though we might live amidst capitalism, we experience and express value a little differently herein.

This, of course, is one of the things I love and most easily embrace about the church: we don't necessarily glorify the people who are already being glorified, we glorify and rejoice in everyone, all who come to join us and to bring what they have to offer and to receive what they need. I have no doubt about the truth and value of this full embrace.

And yet I mention that gift now because someone out there has such faith in what we're doing as to support it in this bold and surprising way. That shouldn't be an assurance only a few of us know. I say it also because it might spur others to give on this scale as well, this person having hoped others would join the effort.

It's true, the capital campaign is all about maintaining our building, re-beautifying our home. But this is a ministry, too, I pray. It's not vanity, it's not boastfulness, it's an appeal to the community that all might know God as beautiful and sound and theirs to approach as they need and participate in as they can. That our building, our home, is appealing makes the message all the clearer. Bless us that we improve it in good faith and bold hope.

Thanks be to God.