

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2015

"FEEL AT HOME"

by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43 ~ John 6:56-69

During my Clinical Pastoral Education internship at a large Chicago hospital, an Anglican priest was part of my cohort group. He was a pastor in Bristol, England, and he was on sabbatical. Now my idea of a sabbatical would never be a three month intensive CPE program at a trauma one facility, but he was thrilled to be there. Philip was a "decent chap," as they say, modest, soft-spoken, funny in that British ironic sort of way. I especially enjoyed his accent. I thought "If I had an accent like that, everything I say would sound intelligent." "Pass the biscuits" would sound like a nugget of wisdom, some esoteric philosophy from an Oxford don. During lunch one day someone mentioned the challenges she was having caring for her old church building. She said that every time she suggests a new ministry someone on the Council mentions the funds they will soon need to raise for a new roof. Father Philip nodded knowingly, then asked, "How old is your building, then?" "1922," my colleague answered with a sigh. "What about yours?" "Well," he said with a wry smile, "mine went up in 1150."

1150! Can you imagine gathering where people have worshipped for 865 years? Just three years ago this Sunday we celebrated our 125th anniversary, and that seems like a long time to me. But 865 years!

But today we are remembering a holy place that was dedicated 950 years before Christ came. It was the temple that Solomon built. Now the Israelites had little experience in major construction, so Solomon cut a deal with King Hiram of Tyre, who sent his architects and artisans to do it right. I find it ironic that God's Temple in Jerusalem was built by foreigners, especially those pagan Canaanites who Israel had always battled. Well, God made them, too. They were children of God, too.

King Solomon's Temple lasted about three and a half centuries, until the Babylonians destroyed it in 587 BCE. King Zerubbabel built a new temple in the same location in about 515, and King Herod began rebuilding that in 20, but it was destroyed again by the Romans in 70 CE. That means the temple was under construction the whole time Jesus and his disciples were there. When Jesus was teaching in the Temple, he had to look at the scaffolding and the wheelbarrows, and the buckets of plaster sitting around. I can certainly sympathize when I look out of window each day. I wonder if this might have led Jesus, like it has led me, to think of God's holy place as being always "under construction." Nothing remains of Solomon's Temple, not a single stone, and all that remains of Herod's is a bit of the retaining wall which held the hill together where the Temple was perched up above. But God still has a house - many houses, in fact.

Way back in Solomon's day, when they finished the magnificent Beth-Yahweh, they had a big celebration to dedicate it, and Solomon prayed that God would accept this house and move on in. Our prayers range from the delightful to the desperate, as if God were some kind of cosmic complaint department, but how often do you hear anybody pray, "Make yourself at home here, God!?"

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 (1 Kings 8:28-30).

I think some of those Canaanite construction workers were there, too, because Solomon even prays for outsiders, that they will meet God in this Temple as well:

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 (1 Kings 8:41-43).

Amazing, isn't it? You don't often see that kind of openness to outsiders, but it's right there in the Bible!

In those days, most nations had a temple to their national god in their capital city. And a temple was considered to be a kind of intersection between heaven and earth, a doorway to the divine realm ... the one place on earth where you could count on meeting that god. Of course, locating the deity that way gave the gatekeepers of the Temple ... usually the King and his priests ... a lot of power. And it also kind of contained the gods, maybe kept them from breaking out and meeting people at places and times they didn't really want to meet. Gods can be inconvenient that way.

It's a remarkable thing to consider ... building God a house ... asking God to move in, hang out, always be there to meet you if you want to meet. Naturally, Solomon built God the finest house in the land ... the best stone, the finest wood, the purest gold. You don't just ask God to take an efficiency apartment! You design the kind of place you think it would take to make the one who "owns the cattle on a thousand hills" feel at home. Solomon's Temple was the finest house in the land. But in the years that followed, the prophets claimed that the best stone, the finest wood, the purest gold weren't really what God was looking for in a home. Seems it had more to do with the family hanging out in the house with God ... and the way they behaved in relation to each other.

You know what I mean. What makes a house a home? It's not the building. We all know there's more love and happiness in some of the poorest shacks than in the some of the finest mansions.

Home is really more about safety than shelter, and even more about relationships. As they say, "home is where the heart is." Home is where you experience love. To be truly at home, I think you have to feel at home with everybody in the house and they have to feel at home with you. But, human relationships being what they are, that feeling can come and go. It takes a lot of grace and no little effort for people to live together in peace. It takes kindness, patience, humility, respect, love, self-sacrifice, service to one another, and lots of forgiveness, too. You don't let your differences fester. You don't let the sun go down on your anger. You work things out. You speak the truth in love and get back to being in a good space with each other. And you do this, as much as you are able, with every person in the house so everybody can feel at home ... because you can't feel at home if you're avoiding somebody all the time.

Now this is God's house, a sacred space dedicated 128 years ago. I wasn't here, but I know they prayed that this would be a place where God would dwell and we could meet God whenever we need to meet God. There's no denying that a lot of people have met God often in this place, so God has honored that prayer. But I find myself asking today, does God always feel at home here? Do the people who come here feel at home with us and at home with God? That's really what we're trying to do here, isn't it? Isn't that our mission ... to learn how to feel at home with God by coming to God's house and being with God's family and shaping our lives to be pleasing to God? So that prayer of dedication, made 128 years ago, was not just a plea to God but a goal and a promise for us. We're still trying to live up to it ... to live into it as the family of God. We need to keep praying it, and let our prayer shape our living in this place. We're still under construction here!

What makes God's house a home? It isn't the building. This is a lovely sanctuary. But what makes God's house a home is not the building. It's the people. What we do with our words ... what we do with our money ... what we do with our actions ... that's what makes God's house a home. And like every home, it takes kindness, patience, humility, respect, love, self-sacrifice, service to one another, and lots of forgiveness, too. You don't let your differences fester. You don't let the sun go down on your anger. You work things out. You speak the truth in love and get back to being in a good space with each other. And you do this, as much as you are able, with every person in the church so that everybody can feel at home, because you can't feel at home if you're avoiding somebody all the time.

Now I'm not saying this with any particular situation or any particular persons in mind today. In fact, I feel freer to say it than I would if there were some major rift happening, lest you think I use the pulpit to manipulate church politics. I want to say that I have never seen a group of people who care for one another the way you do and work harder to make this the house of God for everybody who walks through the door. I know that's why Deb, Tobi and Mark, Amy and Mike, Cynthia and Gary ... have chosen to join our church this morning ... it's not because of me ... it's because of you! But still, I think we need to be reminded ... maybe at least once a week ... that we are God's family, and it's our high calling, as much as we are able, to make everybody feel at home with God and with each other. It's an impossible task, because sadly, some people will never feel at home with making everybody feel at home. But for those who do, the reward is rich ... to be comfortable in your own skin ... to have deep and reliable friendships ... and to live your life close to God. The psalmist had it right: *"How lovely is your dwelling*

place, O Lord of hosts!" (Psa 84:1). Only, it's not the building, but the people who make God's house a home.

There's one more thing we have to see about this prayer Solomon prayed to dedicate the house he built for God in Jerusalem. You won't see this very often in the liturgy of other Temples of that time. Some scholars even think it was added to the prayer later because it interrupts the logical flow. They think it was added by a prophet who saw Israel's mistake in thinking the Temple could control God's activity or guarantee Israel's prosperity no matter how they behaved. We must remember the Temple has this limitation: *"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!"* (1 Kings 8:27). We must never think people can't meet God unless they go to church, let alone our church. We must never think we have God trapped here, to do our bidding at our convenience. It doesn't work that way. We must never think we can be at home with God here on Sundays and live godless, godawful lives the rest of the week. It doesn't work that way either. God shows up in your own house. God drops by the place where you work. God hangs out in the places you go for entertainment. And God wants to feel at home with you in all those places, too.

Years later when the crowds quit following Jesus because they didn't like what he was asking of them, the one who had no place to lay his head, no home of his own, asked his closest disciples, *"Do you also wish to go away?"* And for once, those disciples were right on. Peter spoke for all of them: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"* (John 6:66-68). It wasn't about a building or a holy place. It was about being with Jesus. He asked the world of them ... showed them their weaknesses and flaws ... called them to be more and do more ... to do things God's way instead of their way. He was inconvenient to follow, but they followed anyway because nobody, I mean nobody, made them feel so alive and so at home with God. So home wasn't a place, but a relationship. Home was where their hearts were. Home was where Jesus was. It still is. It still is. I pray you feel at home with God. I pray God feels at home with us. Amen. May we pray?

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts. Thank you for meeting us here, and hearing our prayers. We want to be your children ... your family ... we want to show the world the goodness of your name. Slowly, but surely, you are shaping us to be the kind of people who live by your love. Don't give up on us, Lord, because we know we aren't there, yet. But by your presence, by your grace and love, and we will get there. Amen.