

## Being Human, Being Holy

**A Sermon taken from 1 Corinthians 3. 16-17, and preached on February 20, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter**

Recently Pam and I were visiting a museum and the primary exhibit was related to North Carolina pottery. Sometimes we take the gifts that are nearest to us for granted; you can travel long distances in any direction and when you find artistic and creative people and strike up a conversation and they ask where you are from and you say North Carolina, their eyes will light up and they will begin to talk about the pottery of the North Carolina piedmont. So we were looking at these amazing works of art, some of these jugs, vases were four feet tall and two feet in diameter, pretty much in awe of the craft of the potter. On one wall there was a quote from a Chinese philosopher, Lau Tzu, who lived in the sixth century:

*"Pots are made out of clay, but the hollow space in them makes the essence of the pot and the essence of the pot comes from an intangible something in the spirit of the potter. The more highly developed the potter is as a human, the better his pot, for there is no real beauty without character".*

The Bible is filled with images that describe the work of the creator: a potter who works with clay, a farmer who sows seeds, a builder who lays the foundation stone. Paul uses all of these images in his writings and several in the beginning chapters of his letter to the church in Corinth, a coastal city in Greece. He served as pastor there for about a year and a half, a long time for Paul to be in any one place, and we sense, as we read his correspondence to them, that he has his hand on the pulse of some of the issues: to begin with there are divisions, factions. They sit around in their Bible Studies and compare their churches to other churches, or their preacher to other preachers. It was a way to pass the time in the ancient Mediterranean world. One says, "**I belong to Paul**". Another says, "**I belong to Apollos**". Another says, "**I belong to Peter**". Another says, "I can trump you all, **I belong to Christ!**"

In addition, the people seemed to enjoy endless discussions about precise philosophical points, and Paul had little patience for this as well. It was, he felt, a way of avoiding the gospel, and by avoiding the gospel he meant avoiding the cross. At times, Paul sensed that the progress was slow: the church at Corinth was a little like a child who never grows up, who simply wants to be entertained; you do not give an infant solid food when she is only prepared to digest milk. And this led Paul back to his diagnosis: why do some of you continue to say "**I belong to Paul**", "**I belong to Apollos**"? Why the obsession with your human leaders?

The divisions seem to be particularly troublesome to Paul; he will return to this again later in I Corinthians, in response to abuses around the Lord's Supper (ch. 11) and in a long discussion of spiritual gifts (ch. 12-14), the greatest gift being love. Let's transplant Paul the missionary from 1<sup>st</sup> century Europe to 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, and ask ourselves, "What would he see?" Would he hear people saying, "I belong to Elevation" or "I belong to a Myers Park Church" or "I am a Baptist" or "I watch Joel Osteen on television?" or "I am a conservative Christian" or "I am a progressive Christian"? And what would all of that mean? Would Paul reach his same conclusion? I wish you were ready to do the work of God, I wish you were interested in being a strong and growing body of Christ, but that would require solid food, and you are still infants. Have a glass of milk.

What is going on with the church of Jesus Christ? Well, Paul takes a step back and like any master communicator, he re-frames it. All of these human leaders, yes they are being used by God for your benefit: **I planted**, Paul says, **Apollos watered**, but only **God gives the growth**. I began the work, Paul says, another will continue the building, but Jesus is the foundation. And then he comes to critical insight, and one I want us to stay with: **Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?**

Those familiar with God's story would have known about the temple, the holy place, the holiest place, the dwelling place of God, around which all of the laws are written, in which all of the sacrifices are offered, the destination of homecoming in Psalm 84 and eternal life in Psalm 23. The temple was destroyed and then rebuilt and then destroyed again, during the century in which Jesus lived. When Jesus cleansed the temple, driving out the money changers, the leaders asked him for a sign. **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,"** he said. **"It took us forty-six years to build this temple"**, they responded, **"how will you raise it in three days?"** Then John comments that he was making reference to the temple of his body.

A shift is happening here: there is a new place to find God. God is present not only in the temple in Jerusalem; God is present in Jesus. **"In him,"** Paul writes, **"all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"**. And now another shift is taking place: from the temple of God in Jerusalem to the temple of Jesus, his resurrected body, to this statement of the Apostle Paul: **"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?"**

A beautiful temple is built, people worship there, the sacrifices are offered, prayers are lifted up, God is glorified. Then the temple is destroyed, then it is rebuilt, and the living God is there. A child is born, people offer him gifts, their own sacrifices, he grows up and is baptized, he calls disciples and teaches them. Then he realizes

that he himself will be the sacrifice for God's people, his body is crucified and broken but then it is lifted up, and the living God is there, in the power of the spirit.

You and I are created in God's image, every one of us. God has a purpose, an intention for us, each day, to reflect his image, which is love, to live in communion with God, in prayer, and to see God's image in each other, which is service. But over time this image becomes tarnished, worn, disfigured, difficult to see. It is easy to lose touch with our identity. And yet, the truth remains: **Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?"**

To be human is to be a work in progress, with flaws and failures along the way. The word human is related to the word humus, soil. And so we begin with the most ordinary materials. A potter in the piedmont of Western North Carolina takes the clay and glazes with characteristics that are peculiar, but common to us, and over time the result is something beautiful. It is a work of art.

You and I are that work in progress, we are the humus, the clay, the assembled raw materials----where we have come from, our parents and grandparents, our experiences and education and advantages and adversity----all of that is who we are. We can hide behind something else, pretend to be something other than who we are, deny all of this, but our humanity is the substance that is used in the creative work.

I stood in the museum that afternoon looking at the vases that filled a large room, all of them different in size and shape, I wondered: What if we began to see each other with the reverence we would give to a work of art? Because each of us is God's temple, and God's spirit dwells in you, and the person near you. I know this is not our natural way of seeing things. We think of temples as holy places: this sanctuary, or perhaps a church that was important in our spiritual formation, or a retreat center, or a camp meeting. Some of you have traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem, or to the Sea of Galilee, or to Rome, or Canterbury, or Aldersgate Street in London, or to places of pilgrimage in our own country that commemorate sacrifices or remember injustices.

Some believe these are holy places because something profound and extraordinary happened there; others believe they become holy places because of the prayers that people bring to them. I think of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem where people stand in lines to finally touch the wall and place written prayers in the crevices of the rock. It is a holy place because people bring the holy, they bring themselves, their humanity, and they make an offering.

It does seem to be a stretch from standing at the temple to believe that you and I are the temple, but it is true, because God's spirit dwells in us. In the creation, in Genesis 1 God breathes into man and woman and we become a living being. We

are created in the image of God, we are given dignity, each of us, and God says, of the creation, it is good!

We are God's temple, because God lives in each of us, and this is both a celebration and a warning: do not destroy the temple, do not do harm to each other, for there is something sacred in every person. We could reflect on the ways people are treated in ways that diminish them: the trafficking of human beings, pornography, the violation of basic human rights, the abuse of the body with drugs. The body is a glorious thing, it is the creation of God, it is not to be trashed or destroyed.

One evening recently I watched a documentary about human trafficking from a very poor area of Eastern Europe, Moldova, into Turkey. Young women were promised jobs, taken in ships, sold to a third party, forced into prostitution. Some escaped, some were released, some became ill, and a number of these returned home. But as they told their stories there was a vacancy in their eyes, as if the life had been taken from them, and of course it had. As a variety of individuals were interviewed in the documentary it was obvious that few had any kind of moral framework to understand this experience.

Why should we care? Christians are advocates for the most vulnerable in this world because we believe in the sacredness of life: **"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?"**

Paul is writing to people who believe themselves to be spiritual, cosmopolitan and intellectual, and of course they are. First century Greece and Twenty-first century North America are more similar than we realize. But there are problems. At times the church itself is scarred and disfigured; *"though with a scornful wonder we see her sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed"*, the hymn has it. Those hearing Paul's words for the first time were new to the faith, still grasping the implications of what it meant to be created in God's image, shaped by the cross, and filled with the Holy Spirit, and what it might mean to live together in the new creation: *"One Lord, one faith, one birth"*.

How do we inhabit this space together, this space made beautiful by the character of its creator? We would be disturbed if an art museum was vandalized, we would be horrified if a sanctuary was desecrated. Paul's wisdom for us is to see the holy in each other, one scholar has commented, *"Christians often hold our church sanctuaries and even their furnishings in holy awe, but can be remarkably casual about the people in the church"*. The essence of a church is its people, and the essence of a person is the spirit that dwells deep within. The divisions are all on the surface, and are finally trivial. We are holy because we are human.

Sources: Stephen Farris, *The Lectionary Commentary*. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans.