

'What Might We Build Here?'
Innaugural Sermon
by Rev'd. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen
The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH
23 August, 2015
Proper 16B
1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43
Psalm 84
John 6:56-69

Solomon, the great King David's son, was all about building. And he didn't do things on a small scale: Solomon was all about building impressive, jaw-dropping structures that the world would notice, and talk about, and remember him for. It took seven years and tens of thousands of men to perform everything necessary to build the First Temple, but Solomon was a man with grand vision. The Temple was built on Mount Moriah, a site his father David had chosen, where it was visible to the world all around. And it was unmatched in its splendour and scale. Gold, cedar, bronze, fine fabrics, marble—it was gorgeous, and massive.

But Solomon wasn't only responsible for constructing impressive edifices; he was also a builder of relationships and alliances, and he did those on a massive scale, too. As he progressed in age and prowess, Solomon became legendary for his wisdom and political savvy, his ability to bring disparate people together. He also became legendary for his unbridled lust—his 700 wives and 300 concubines, each of whom had a favourite god of her own.

Yes, Solomon built the awesome and cherished First Temple; the one we heard such eloquent prayers offered over in our first scripture lesson for this morning. But he also built temples to an impressive number of other popular gods—the gods whom his myriad wives worshipped. And he offered animal and human sacrifices to those gods as part of his politics. You see, Solomon had divided loyalties—his lusts and loves for the things of this world ultimately overwhelmed and undermined the desire he expressed when he built the First Temple to be faithful to God alone.

In the end, Solomon was judged to be a failed king for Israel. Not long after his death, the kingdom split in two after a bitter war that resulted from his unholy alliances. And, despite both north and south claiming devotion to God and God's ways, the two countries spent many years to come sparring and spiting and acting in unseemly ways toward each other. Whereas under King David, the people of Israel had been united in their devotion to God and had been guided as a people to worship Israel's God only, Solomon adopted much more of a laissez-faire attitude toward worship and politics. It worked for him in the short-term, but in the long-run, his legacy was shattered.

The Temple was eventually destroyed and the northern kingdom was conquered. Everything Solomon had spent his life building was reduced to rubble. Although he'd been

given the divine gift of wisdom, he squandered much of it—so that his reputation to this day has less to do with his integrity and honor than with his lust for the things of this world, and his ego-driven quest for greatness. There’s a lesson to be learned in paying attention to the things Solomon sought to build over the sweep of his life.

What do *you* want to build? What have you used—what are you using—your God-given gifts and resources to do, that will last in this world?

What’s being built here at the Congregational Church of Hollis—what might we build together, with God’s help?

One of the laudable things Solomon wanted to do in the construction of the Temple was to create a space where anyone and everyone could encounter the Presence of God. He knew the brokenness of humanity. He knew his own brokenness. So he wanted to build a place where every person—no matter what their background or profile was, the familiar face as much as the alien—every one could bring the hidden, unseemly, desperate, disconsolate, splintered, shameful parts of themselves and their life and find healing there, in the presence of God¹, in the Temple. He begged God not just to bless the temple with divine favour—with an occasional glance or acknowledgement, but in fact he prayed for God to be an active, felt *presence* there. A presence that let people know they were forgiven, granted another chance, trusted to try again to do better next time.

Who doesn’t long for a place like that in our world? Human beings have been building temples and churches and meeting houses for this purpose since history began. The problem is, sometimes the focus gets skewed.

Like Solomon, who started out with good intentions—a desire to glorify God, and to nurture the relationships between God and people—it’s easy to get side-tracked into focusing first and foremost on how the rest of the world perceives us. Ultimately, what came to matter most to Solomon is the impression all his buildings and women and alliances made. He neglected the interior life as he focussed on building and polishing the exterior. And at the end of his life, he was disappointed and unfulfilled.

That’s not to say that attention to the material things of this world is wrong or bad. In fact, our theology of incarnation suggests just the opposite: God does not despise the body, nor the material things of this world. Our Gospel text is a bit of an in-your-face confrontation of the material with the spiritual. The sacramental link is made between the everyday substance of bread, and Jesus’ body; the ordinary or earthly and the sacred become one.

According to John, these were Jesus’ words: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from

¹ This is a paraphrase of the wonderful way Nancy Rockwell set it out in her blog: www.biteintheapple.com, “Body and Soul”.

heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

It’s a difficult teaching to swallow; Jesus’ own disciples acknowledged as much. And because what he taught challenged some individuals to go deeper than they felt they could, John tells us, “...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

Martin Copenhaver, President of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, once described the horrified look of his congregation when, as he prepared the communion table, he repeated Jesus’ familiar words: “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.” Suddenly a small girl said in a loud voice, “Ew, yuk!” It was, he said, “as if someone had splattered blood all over the altar—which, in effect, is something like what the little girl had done with her exclamation.”²

But it’s a fair comment and understandable sentiment from the uninitiated. If we’re honest, many of us will admit that the teaching about eating Jesus’ body and blood is a bit creepy, even to us. So how do we make sense of it, and how does it fit into the bigger theme of what we might build here at the Congregational Church of Hollis?

If you read the entire Sixth chapter of John’s gospel, you’ll notice that it begins with the very pastoral image of the feeding of the 5,000 with a few loaves and fish. It culminates with the challenge that in order to really live, we must feed on Jesus himself.

The day after the mass feeding, Jesus speaks to the crowd that pursued him around the lake. He says to them (in verses 26-27), “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” He goes on to add, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35-36).

It becomes clear that John is trying to drive home the point about what makes for true life-giving nourishment, and it’s not always literal bread. At the conclusion of the scene we heard about in today’s gospel lesson, Jesus says, “It’s the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

Peter clearly understood that, because as we heard at the end of the gospel lesson, when Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’” (John 6:58-59)

In the enterprise of building a strong body—especially when we’re talking about the living, active, resurrected Body of Christ—the old adage, “You are what you eat” takes on new meaning when we’re challenged to think about what we’re taking in spiritually as well as physically. What are we filling ourselves with, body and soul? How will it nourish us so

² www.Day1.org/4043-eating-jesus, Rev’d. Martin Copenhaver.

that we can help God feed the world and build safe houses for the vulnerable, desperate, and ashamed?

Nancy Rockwell, a fellow UCC minister here in New Hampshire, mused in her blog this past week, “Whatever our tradition, most of us manage to separate sacrament from real life, belief from experience, spiritual life from the part of us that makes deals, seeks sex, fumes and fusses about our lives. As Solomon himself did. And as Jesus, according to John, will not allow us to do to him. He will not, if John is right, allow us to make him into a personal comfort, ignoring the afflictions of the lost, the least, the despised, the damned. We cannot pick and choose the parts of him we like, and leave the rest; according to John, that would be the real cannibalizing of him. We must, he says, ingest him completely.”³

As I suggested earlier, that’s not easy stuff to swallow or digest. But it’s life-giving stuff, and it’s what we’re going to need to build something bigger than ourselves here. We’re going to need to feast on every bit of Christ, and allow the life of Jesus to nourish us from the inside out.

I’m excited, and humbled, and grateful that God has drawn us together—that you and I have heard and acknowledged a mutual sense of call to work together, to further build God’s kingdom of justice, joy, peace, and wholeness in this patch of the world.

What, I wonder, might we build here? How might we be built up?

I hope, I pray, that our efforts—individual and collective—will always be leaning toward God’s will and not our own selfish pursuits. And may whatever we build bring glory to God and healing to the world in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

³ Nancy Rockwell, www.biteintheapple.com, “Body and Soul”.