

Dedicating a Church

I Kings 8, selections

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Nineteen decades ago, the presbytery of Mississippi finally succeeded in planting a Presbyterian church down here on the River. A young pastor named John Dorrance had been preaching up a storm since January, 1827, and by the last Sunday of May, the church was ready to be officially formed. A more seasoned pastor named Dr. Jeremiah Chamberlain came down to give the founding sermon and conduct the Lord's Supper.

That day, we began with 15 members, the first Protestant church in all of south Louisiana. The church grew steadily as Dorrance delivered his persuasive sermons. (He also persuaded one of his new church members, Penelope Mercer, to accept his marriage proposal!) It would be two more years before we even had a building, opening on what is now 4th and Florida streets. Life was not easy, and carving out a Protestant identity in a Catholic town meant great dedication and stamina were required. But they did it. God did it.

And here we are, nearly two centuries later through all the twists and turns of the years, grateful to be standing on such strong shoulders. We remain a church at the heart of the city with a heart *for* our city. God continues to draw, and raise up, leaders for our community who are formed in the gospel through our church. We're the only church in Louisiana that currently has two active state legislators. Our history is resplendent with governors, business leaders, educators, and professors, leaders in medicine, the creative arts and the practice of law. We're vibrantly connected to the city we love, and deeply grateful that our Lord has kept us thriving through the rolling years.

At the center of our life, of course, pulses the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only reason we continue through 190 winters and summers, the only reason we have anything meaningful to offer our fair town. How stunning it is, when you really think about it, to realize that faithful elders and pastors have held up and held forth the Word of God so ardently all this time. This morning we are remembering our history and rededicating ourselves to what God is calling us to in the present moment, in order that we might be faithful to the future generations to come.

Our Scripture text comes from the prayers of Solomon on the day the Jerusalem temple was dedicated. Solomon's father David had yearned to build a suitable house of worship for the LORD God of Israel. The LORD had promised that his heart's desire would come to pass, but through the leadership of Solomon. On the day of the grand opening, Solomon offered the prayers of the people. He began with mighty praise, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart" (I Kings. 8: 23). People believed in many kinds of gods, but none had ever known a God whose character is steadfast love. Unique in all the world, Israel's God bound himself in covenant faithfulness to his people. The God who is everywhere promised to make his special presence, his name, known to his people in the Temple. He promised to meet them there. As we consider what the Temple means, we will see some striking connections to our life as a church.

1) The Temple is a building. The LORD did not relate to his people simply as an interior spiritual experience. Our faith is not mere spirituality. We have a God who acted in history to save his people. He created us with an embodied existence and a need to live in community. And he covenanted to meet his people in a particular place. They built the Temple to be the destination for their gathered worship.

Now Solomon knew that the Temple is not the LORD himself. He prayed, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built, yet you have said, "My name shall be there" (8: 27, 29). The building is not God. The building is not the only place to meet God. But the Temple is a building where God promised to meet his people. And the more they met him at the Temple, the more meaningful the building became.

We know that our church is not just our sanctuary. Of course we know that. But we also know that this is an important building in our lives. The more we gather here in every season of the church year and every season of our lives, the more meaningful it becomes. The building echoes with all the experiences of being here before. Any given Sunday resonates with all the other times we have been here. And that makes even ordinary Sundays more powerful and formative than just what may be going on in the moment.

As we mark 13 years with you, I was thinking how significant the buildings of our church have become to me. Significant life events have occurred here. The funerals of both my parents. One engagement of a son. The weddings of three children. The baptism of a grandchild. One confirmation of a daughter. Two senior

Sundays. Christmas Eve's and Easter Sundays. These walls vibrate with significance for my life. Not to mention the intertwining of our lives through hurricanes, floods, lock-downs, tragic losses and great celebrations. And the weekly gathering over God's Word and at the Table where he feeds us with himself. The hugs, the conversation, the tears, the laughter, the bells chiming and the music soaring. Seeing people week by week in their usual places. The delight we have in meeting each other here in every stage and season of life. We count on each other being here. That's what makes it so hard when Bill and Sue Edrington aren't anchoring the pew on the back left side, or when Sue Spaht is not on the front right. We miss them. And yet there is room, always room for the joy of new participants.

This house of God is charged with significance and the more we participate, the more connected we get. This room echoes with the voices of those we carry in our hearts as we arrive to worship. There are always hundreds more here than the bodies that occupy the pews, because we bring them with us in our spirits. This house is alive with people. Yes, the Temple is a building, and the building is very much at the heart of being a church.

2) The Temple is Jesus Christ. Solomon's Temple was the place where God promised to meet his people. In the Holy of holies was the Ark of the Covenant and inside the Ark were the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. The Temple marked the reality that our God speaks to us. The Temple was also the place where forgiveness of sins was sought. Solomon prayed, "And listen to the plea of your people, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive" (8: 30). So at the Temple the sacrifices were offered to make atonement for sins. The blood was placed on the altar and the promise of forgiveness was announced.

But Solomon's Temple was not a final end in itself. The Temple was a sign pointing to something more God planned to do. In the fullness of time, God's Son entered our world. The Word of God himself was made flesh. God's voice could be heard with our ears. The Gospel of John records how Jesus, early on in his ministry, cleared the Temple of the moneychangers. "Do not make my Father's house a house of trade," he said. Jesus symbolically cleared the Temple of its previous meaning. When questioned, Jesus said, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2: 19). The Gospel explains, "The Temple he was speaking about was his body" (2: 21). Jesus himself replaced the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus is the Word of God in flesh. He became the atonement for sin. His blood alone, not all the animal sacrifices, takes away the guilt of sin. Jesus himself became the meeting place between God and humanity. The centuries of the Temple at the heart of the life of God's people turned into the true Temple that is Jesus Christ. He is where we meet God.

And that is still what we seek when we come to this building. As significant as is our sanctuary, it's not an end in itself. We come to encounter Jesus the Word of God as we meet over his Scriptures. We come to be nourished and joined to Jesus as we partake of his Supper. We seek forgiveness not in a building but in Christ alone. He is the one meeting place between God and man. He is the true Temple.

3) The Temple is the congregation. Jesus the true Temple of God did not remain in this world in a place where we could go find him physically. He returned to heaven. But he did not leave us without a way to meet him. He created his people the church to be the spiritual Temple where the world could meet him. Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth, “[You, together], you are the temple of God and God’s Spirit dwells in you” (1 Cor. 3: 16). The church gathered for worship becomes the new meeting place between God and humanity. So Peter would write, “You yourselves like living stones are being built as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2: 5).

The Temple of God is now the worldwide community of Christ's people. Scripture speaks of this in many ways. We are the body of which Jesus is the head. We are the branches of Jesus who is the central vine. And we are the living house of which Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. Every time we gather in the name of Jesus, the Temple is created. People can meet God. They can discover atonement for their sins. They can be taken into the story and the mission of the church.

So we gather week by week in a building that grows in significance to us Sunday by Sunday and through the years. But we always know that the building is not the point. Christ is the point. We gather in order to be nourished and strengthened so that we can be sent. The church gathers in order to be distributed onto the mission field of life. In our daily life, we reflect the glow from our gathering. And the witness of our lives draws others to our gathering.

As Solomon prayed, he knew that the great Temple would draw people from all over the world. But it wasn't just because of the building. He prayed, "They shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm" and those who hear will "come from a far country for your name's sake...They will come and pray towards this house" (I Kings 8: 41-43). The Temple was always meant to be *missional*. The building was a tangible sign that the LORD had acted to save and redeem his people. As the story was told of God who spoke truth, forgave sins and cared for his people, others would come to find that for themselves.

That's us. As we experience Christ's transforming grace through our church, we have a story to tell others who are searching. We change from selfishness to love, from bitterness to forgiveness, from emptiness to joy. And then we invite others to experience this too.

Our church Foundation has recently adopted a motto for their initiative to shore up the financial stability of our church. It's called *Rooted and Reaching*. I think that's an excellent slogan for our 190th birthday. We are rooted. Rooted in the history of this city. Rooted in the faithfulness of many previous generations. Rooted in the ancient witness of the apostles and all the faithful Christians throughout the centuries and around the world. We draw strength from the unchanging gospel. And at the very same time, we offer that Gospel to an ever changing world. We keep retelling the old, old story faithfully but in words that address the times in which we live. We keep reaching into the future with the ancient gospel.

The priorities of our church continue to push us outward. For this season, we have invested significantly in beginning a new church in New Orleans. The Church of the Resurrection is a major way we are reaching into the world with the Gospel. We have also invested heavily in the Gardere Community Christian School. We believe that the most effective community transformation happens through nurturing families and leading children to know their worth in Christ. Day by day, the school releases their potential through Jesus to leave poverty and build a better city. We continue to stay rooted in the truth of God's Word and we give thanks that we are part of a denomination of churches who have pledged themselves to the essential truth of Scripture. We continue to press forward to grow our children in Christ, forming the next generations of church leaders. We press ahead with 30 ministry partnerships in our city, seeking to shine Christ's light into Baton Rouge. At higher levels than ever before, we continue to launch missionaries around the world with the gospel.

On the occasion of our 190th birthday, we have much to celebrate. A vibrant, multi-generational congregation committed to pressing deeper in Christ in daily life. An outward focused, generous church committed to reaching further into our city and world with his gospel. It's a joy to be part of this congregation. I love being your pastor. It awes me to have been called to run one leg of a race that has been running for 190 years so far and will, I pray, continue until Christ returns. To that end, dear flock, let us dedicate ourselves anew to Jesus our Lord and Savior and to living life in Christ together through our beloved church.