

11th Weekend after Pentecost

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

Grace to you and peace from God our father, our lord and savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

This week, we will be streaming worship from our sanctuaries for the first time since we entered lockdown. With this reading from Isaiah, it seems appropriate to try leading the live streamed worship from that space. And as I am writing this reflection to you, I confess that I feel nervous. We will only be sharing the live stream from the sanctuary, so the only ones in that space will be those leading the service. And I confess that I anticipate feeling a great sadness to be leading worship from the sanctuary without the congregation physically present.

And I think that those hearing the prophet Isaiah's words would have also been caught between the relief of seeing and imagining their house of worship, and the reality that it just does not look like they want it to look. They are looking out on the temple mount and seeing only the ruins of the temple they have heard stories of. The words of Isaiah do not match what these people are seeing with their eyes, and these words go beyond what was experienced by the peoples' ancestors as well. We hear in this reading and the verses we skipped in 2-5 that both eunuchs and foreigners, two groups that had not been welcome in the temple before the exile, will now be a part of what the temple is. Truly a house of prayer for all. We know that we have been worshipping in our homes for the good of protecting others in our community, but it is still hard to be separated. Just imagine the separation of generations of exile only to return to rubble and then hear these words. The intermingling of disappointment and hope must have been almost tangible for those people listening to Isaiah.

Why do we as humans seek buildings of worship so strongly? Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, all would have worshipped God outside, but their descendents sought a temple. The earliest Christians gathered in small groups in peoples' homes, but their descendents sought and still seek a dedicated building for worship. We heard several weeks ago the warning from Jeremiah where the Judeans had managed to confuse the temple for God, and Jeremiah has to remind them what the actual purpose of the temple was supposed to be: a house of prayer for all the nations. And here in today's reading, the promise Isaiah gives to the people is of a temple that has been restored and has become a part of God's intention for the whole world even more than the first temple.

I think the answer is twofold. Why do humans seek a worship space? For one reason, I think that psychology is important. It is easier for us to feel and be worshipful when we are in a space

dedicated to that. But even more so, I think we artistically find ways to use the space around us as a part of our teaching and proclamation of who God is.

Let's think of some examples. As Salem and Zion together, we are blessed to be able to see two different sanctuaries that try to highlight different parts of our faith. I don't have the space to look at all of the different facets of the two buildings, but I wanted to share my observations as someone relatively new to the community.

Salem's sanctuary was designed to pass down the message of awe. There is elaborate artwork on all the walls and surfaces. The structure is very traditional in structure; there are Bible verses painted on the walls. The amount of art is overwhelming, with the intention to remind us to be in awe. One message that seems particularly relevant right now is the symbolism of the communion railing not forming a full circle. The symbolism is that this table extends beyond what we can see. It is a reminder that we have always confessed that when we worship, we join with all the saints throughout time and space in worshipping God, not just those saints we can see. For those designing the space, it was important to teach reverence and awe.

Zion's sanctuary was designed to pass down the message of simplicity. All that is needed is God. The space is defined by clean lines and simple designs. There are few distractions. The artistic decorations change with the seasons. The altar is in the center and there is room to gather all the way around the altar. One message that seems particularly relevant right now is the intention of flexibility. The altar, pulpit, font, all can be moved to a different configuration to help carry different messages based on the time of year and different worship services. For those designing the space, it was important to teach simplicity and to encourage the congregation to focus our attention on God, even when we are sent back out into a world where it is often hard to see God.

But more importantly, these spaces both are spaces that teach us to pray. Not because of the building itself, but because of what we the church have used the buildings for. For groups to meet and teach about our faith. For groups to meet to comfort and encourage those struggling. To gather to help and love our neighbors. As we have proclaimed and sung for years, it is not the building that makes us who we are; it is God who unites us, sanctifies us, and makes us one.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing **and phone options**. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We are excited to offer our Wednesday services sharing testimonies from the congregation. Today, you will find Dave Manki's testimony from August 12 included. If you are interested in sharing a testimony, please call either office. Peace be with you!

We are planning to create an Advent devotional written by members of the congregation. If you are interested in learning more about this, please call the offices or contact Pr. Nicole.

Peace be with you!