

11 November 2018

Cathedrals and Meeting Houses

2 Kings 12:4-16

For the most part, the biblical history of the kings of Israel and Judah is a story of failure and disappointment, at least from God's perspective. Every now and then, though, there appeared a king who wanted to lead the people in faithful worship of the Lord. We read the story of King Jehoshaphat from 2 Kings 18, verses 4-16:

⁴Jehoshaphat said to the priests, 'All the money offered as sacred donations that is brought into the house of the Lord, the money for which each person is assessed—the money from the assessment of persons—and the money from the voluntary offerings brought into the house of the Lord, ⁵let the priests receive from each of the donors; and let them repair the house wherever any need of repairs is discovered.' ⁶But by the twenty-third year of King Jehoshaphat the priests had made no repairs to the house. ⁷Therefore King Jehoshaphat summoned the priest Jehoiada with the other priests and said to them, 'Why are you not repairing the house? Now therefore do not accept any more money from your donors but hand it over for the repair of the house.' ⁸So the priests agreed that they would neither accept more money from the people nor repair the house.

⁹Then the priest Jehoiada took a chest, made a hole in its lid, and set it beside the altar on the right side as one entered the house of the Lord; the priests who guarded the threshold put in it all the money that was brought into the house of the Lord. ¹⁰Whenever they saw that there was a great deal of money in the chest, the king's secretary and the high priest went up, counted the money that was found in the house of the Lord, and tied it up in bags. ¹¹They would give the money that was weighed out into the hands of the workers who had the oversight of the house of the Lord; then they paid it out to the carpenters and the builders who worked on the house of the Lord, ¹²to the masons and the stonecutters, as well as to buy timber and quarried stone for making repairs on the house of the Lord, as well as for any outlay for repairs of the house. ¹³But for the house of the Lord no basins of silver, snuffers, bowls, trumpets, or any vessels of gold, or of silver, were made from the money that was brought into the house of the Lord, ¹⁴for that was given to the workers who were repairing the house of the Lord with it. ¹⁵They did not ask for an account from those into whose hand they delivered the money to pay out to the workers, for they dealt honestly. ¹⁶The money from the guilt-offerings and the money from the sin-offerings was not brought into the house of the Lord; it belonged to the priests.

Mostly, when you hear the word “stewardship” in church, you understand it to mean “giving money to the church,” right? Because a “stewardship” sermon is where the preacher tells you to give more money to the church. But that's not really what the word means, or at least not *all* that the word means. A steward is someone who manages property that belongs to others, and so *stewardship* officially means “management.” The way that gets applied to church giving is to remind people that all we have is a gift from God, and so what we do with our resources is in a sense management of God's generosity. But that's an awful lot broader than just putting more in the offering plate. In fact, that definition of stewardship needs to be applied not just to what individuals do with what has been entrusted to them, but also to what we as a church do with the

gifts given to us. We can't start talking to individuals about their stewardship of God's gifts unless we're ready to be open about our own stewardship of their gifts to God.

So let's look at the long story we just read from 2 Kings 12, about King Jehoash. He came to the throne as a child, but apparently even as a child he was aware that the temple of God in Jerusalem was falling apart. I'm picturing it shabby, stained, peeling, threadbare, and don't get me started on the need for tuck-pointing. So Jehoash told the priests that they needed to use the temple offerings to rehab the House of God. Well, you know how it is when you're king: things get busy, and you can't focus on everything at once, but some twenty-three years later Jehoash went by to check on the progress of the renovations, and nothing had been done, and no money had been set aside for it. In twenty-three years. I'm sure it was on the Trustees' agenda, but . . . you know. Stuff happens.

Jehoash wasn't happy, so he gave some new orders. First, the priests weren't to get paid until the work was funded. All new offerings were to go for renovations. (I have to admit, as I worked on this sermon, I fantasized about trying this approach with Congress. Just a thought.) Second, Jehoash established some new procedures: offerings went into a secure box, were taken out by the high priest *and* the king's secretary together, and delivered directly to the workmen doing the work. Then – and I find this worth noting – the workmen were to be permitted to do the work without bean-counters hovering over them. Hire trustworthy craftsmen, then trust them. Finally, once all that was in place, a small stipend – just the revenue from a couple of the offerings – was established so that the priests didn't starve. In effect, Jehoash acted to rectify poor stewardship on behalf of the temple.

There are enough differences between a 9th century BCE temple and a 21st century CE United Methodist Church that we need to be careful about inferring specific lessons for us, but there are definitely some general conclusions that we can draw. First of all, good stewardship by a church requires that we have a purpose. The problem with the temple was that for at least twenty-three years they had no clear sense of purpose other than to maintain the status quo. *Particularly* the status quo of the priests. They kept things trudging along, but started nothing new, imagined nothing different. What Jehoash did was give them a purpose: to make this temple a glorious building, reflecting the glory of God.

As purposes go, the ones involving buildings aren't my favorite. I know that sometimes building truly is an act of worship. I read a book a few years back about the construction of the great 12th century cathedrals in Europe. It was glorious the way every craftsman in a town would give of their time and gifts to do their part in building these magnificent tributes to God, and that spirit is still there. If you can walk into the Cathedral of Chartres without feeling the presence of God, you're not paying attention. So building *can* be a holy purpose. It's just that too often I've seen new buildings become monuments to particular pastors, or even donors, rather than expressions of praise to God. But there are other purposes. The Puritans, for instance, rejected all physical ornament in church, met in simple meeting houses and focused their stewardship on maintaining good teaching. They saw the church falling apart in other ways, and their purpose was to repair the church's doctrine, rather than its woodwork. Whatever the purpose of a church is, though, the point remains the same: the church can't be a good steward of its resources if it doesn't know its purpose. And keeping things humming along the way we're used to them is *not* a sufficient purpose.

I've only been here at Lake Street a year and a half, but here is the core purpose I have discerned in this congregation: building bridges. We cannot stand the idea that we may, intentionally or not, be excluding someone from encountering God in our midst. This is why we have worked to make our building accessible, why we invest so much in radio and Facebook broadcasts for those who can't be here and hearing devices for those who can but need assistance. This is why we have sponsored workshops on depression and dementia and the barriers that those represent, why we are working to become fully welcoming to LGBTQ children of God, and why this year we initiated a special worship service for people with disabilities. Other churches do many of these things; here it is a passion. Full inclusion of others may be a goal we will never achieve – the world throws up new walls all the time – but for this church, the message and forgiveness of Christ is for everyone and while we breathe we will keep building bridges. We have a purpose.

Having a purpose is essential, but our story teaches that there must also be accountability. That was another problem with the temple. With no one checking on whether they were doing anything constructive with their offerings, they didn't. We can even draw one clear and specific rule from our scripture: if you want accountability of resources, don't leave it to up to the clergy. Just don't, all right? You see, even those of us that are both honest and financially competent – and that eliminates a goodly number of us already – don't have much incentive here. Paid clergy can get comfortable in the status quo. Accountability has to come from the congregation. This is why, for instance, the offerings that we'll receive shortly will never be handled by just one person, will be put in a safe until it is counted by a team of trustworthy and faithful laypeople. It will be deposited in the bank and the receipt will be checked against the count totals, and in all that time it will remain untouched by clergy hands. This is as it should be. Trust me on this one. I know a lot of clergy.

Then, finally, once these processes of accountability are in place, we trust our workers to be faithful to our purpose. The volunteers and lay leaders of a church are not the ones who will misuse the church's resources; they remember where those resources came from and why they were given. And more than just trusting our workers, we trust God. We trust that, so long as we maintain our purpose and remain accountable, God will provide all that we need. I really believe that. The IM Church that began here last summer costs anywhere from \$40 to nearly \$200 each time we gather – a worship service for the disabled has to offer things like transportation and sign language translation. But paying for these things has not been a problem for us, and I don't have the slightest flicker of doubt that so long as we stay true to our purpose, we will always have the resources we need.

As the church's influence has waned in the United States, lack of money has increasingly become an obsession for us. It's just gotten harder and harder to maintain ourselves in the style to which we have become accustomed, so a whole "stewardship" industry has sprung up to teach churches methods for extracting ever more blood from the congregational turnip. (You don't mind being called turnips, do you? Good, good.) For instance, did you know that blue offering envelopes are more effective than white ones? Oh yes, there was a study done on the money drawing effects of different colors. (I sometimes think it would be pleasant if we would devote half as much time to studying how to deepen people's prayer lives as we do to how to dig deeper into their wallets. Again, just a thought.) But even if these "techniques" have some use (and that's a big "if"), there are things that must come first: purpose and accountability. To put it another way, our job is not to get more money for the church. Our job is make the church worth

giving money to. People need to see that we have a purpose beyond our own maintenance, and that time and money given to support that purpose will be used faithfully.

Let me tell you what happens when you neglect those details. As many of you know, most of our churches today have been supported for years by people from what is sometimes called the “Builder” generation – people who knew the Great Depression and the rationing of World War II as children. These people learned early on that money was not always there, so they manage it well, save as much as possible, and interestingly enough have been very generous in giving money to the church. The next couple of generations – the so-called “Boomers” and “Generation X” don’t have that same record. Boomers and we Gen-Xers grew up in times of relative prosperity, and we tend to spend more, borrow more, and save less. And, as a group, we give less than half as much to charity as our parents and grandparents did. And now there are those Millennials – now in their twenties or early thirties. The Millennials came of age during the Great Recession, and their attitudes reflect those of the Builders. They save more than their parents did, spend less, and *hate* debt. And they give generously to charity – as a percentage of income, Millennials give more than anyone since the Builders. True fact. I bet you didn’t know that. And you know why you didn’t know that? Because that giving is not going to the church. Millennials generally don’t see that the church has a compelling purpose, and they definitely don’t believe the church can be trusted to use their money well. All they see is churches desperate for more money so that they can survive a little longer. So Millennials give to Heifer International, volunteer at community food banks or homeless shelters, and never look over their shoulder at the church, which appears to them to exist for the sake of continuing to exist.

Sometimes, they’re right. But not here. In today’s stewardship sermon, I have told you about our church’s stewardship. I have told you that we do in fact have a purpose beyond existing – to build bridges to all – and that that purpose is more than a statement printed on church letterhead but is a passion. And I have told you that we are committed to maintaining accountability and transparency and trust, and we have processes in place to ensure that. And I will make this promise to you today: as long as I am here, in this position of leadership, I will hold that purpose and that accountability sacred.

Next week I will talk about our individual stewardship, and we will officially collect offering pledges for 2019. Today, on behalf of your church leaders and congregation, I offer a different pledge: maintaining the status quo will never be our purpose. God has more for us than that. Amen.