

“THE PROBLEM WITH CATHEDRALS”

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

July 23, 2006

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I have had the good fortune of standing in many great old cathedrals and churches. If you ask my children, they'll tell you that when traveling, if we pass any old church, I will try to get a look inside. But I love the vastness and grandeur of the old cathedrals and basilicas, the jewel tones of stained glass and the intricacy of the wood carvings, the mosaics and paintings, candlesticks and crosses of silver and gold. Especially in the oldest of these, I am visited by a profound sense of history—not the history of kings and queens, wars fought, and treaties enacted, but a feeling of generations. I stand and pray on the same stone floor as some 14th century serf, or 16th century merchant. I see the same light as they did streaming through the windows. I think of lives lived and decisions faced by thousands of individual believers, and how they came to this same place seeking solace, guidance, forgiveness, their own sense of place and destiny. And I feel pressing about me “the great cloud of witnesses” spoken of by the biblical writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

Then I consider the planning and construction of such edifices, how they were built to image as much as is humanly possible the magnificence of God, to give that back to God as an offering made not only in coin, in monetary offering, but in the labor of thousands, the craftsmanship of the finest artisans and artists—all, it is said, for the glory of God.

I know that there are at least some of you out there thinking that mine is a pretty romantic image of these great churches. What about the blood money, guilt money, the coerced money and labor that went into the building of these structures? What about the human egos involved? What do we think about chased gold candlesticks encrusted with jewels while the poor of the time lay starving in their hovels?

I'm not unaware of these questions and ambiguities. In fact, when I was younger, I was a cathedral cynic, as it were, seeing in them nothing but posturing, excess, and waste. How could you build buildings like that when a large percentage of your population eked out a grueling subsistence living? Where in the Bible does it say that our God wishes to be worshipped in houses of soaring architecture and fixtures of precious metal?

Well, the answer to the biblical question is that nowhere in the Bible does God ask for us to build temples and cathedrals. In fact, in this morning's reading from 2 Samuel, when King David proposes to the prophet Nathan that he will build a great and beautiful house for God, the best way to put it is that God deflects David's desire, stating that God has been just fine all these years with the Ark of the Tabernacle—the visible symbol of God's presence—traveling around among the people with nothing but a tent for a home. God does not need our cathedrals. We need to be clear about that. The impulse towards the creation of great and beautiful structures does not come from any implicit or explicit desire or commandment of God. God has no need for the houses we build to shelter God's presence. But maybe, just maybe, we do.

David's impulse to build a house for God was an impulse of worship. It was God who plucked him out of the life of an obscure shepherd and made him King over Israel. It was God who established his kingdom and brought the blessing of peace to his borders. David thought it wrong, unseemly, that he, the King, should live in a palace of cedar while the God to whom he owed everything, the ark of God's presence, dwelt in a common tent. David loved God. He believed he owed God everything, and out of that impulse of gratitude and reverence, he wanted to build a house for God that would make visible his devotion, his respect, his love and thankfulness.

How can you argue with that impulse? It is, at some level, the best of our faithfulness to want to give back to God, and to make what we give back the very best that is possible. You read biographies or speak to musicians and composers, theologians, artisans who specialize in ecclesiastical art, even rank and file organists and choir members, ministers who write weekly sermons, and what moves most of them to do what they do is the desire to give back to God something of value, something beautiful, the finest that is in them brought forward to the glory of God.

When I lived in Duluth, a member of the congregation was an organ builder, and though he was regular in his church attendance, he always told me that the hours he spent in his shop were his purest form of worship. And I believed him. Just as I believe church school teachers and bookkeepers, the trustees who spend time fixing and maintaining the building, and those who bring flowers on Sunday mornings—they know the cathedral instinct as well. Their offerings are their acts of faithfulness, things real and true, things of value, utility, and beauty, a bringing forward of particular gifts and skills to carefully tend God's house and all that is sheltered therein.

If we love God, then most of us know in some form the cathedral builder's instinct. And, if we are human, we also know that that instinct lives in us intertwined with all the rest that makes us human. So devotion gets mixed with ego, and faithfulness sits alongside of blindness. Or even more complexly, we care about the church: church as structure and furnishings and program because we know what we give for that reflects our care for God; but we also know that we, like the cathedral builders of old, live in a world of dire poverty and multiple needs, and what we give in time and money to tend God's house could also be used to more directly serve the neediest of God's people.

Am I right here? Do the rest of you worry about these ambiguities and conflicts? Good, because I didn't want to think I was the only one. And the sad truth is that I don't think I can resolve even one of those ambiguities and conflicts for you or even for myself. I do know that if we believe that building cathedrals literally or figuratively is the beginning and end of our work, our devotion to God, then we have forgotten the essential truth that God never asked, never really wanted us to build God grand and glorious houses, and always wants us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. But if we hate the cathedrals of the world, then we hate a part of the best of ourselves, and are also crippled in the living of our faith.

The alternative is that we are called to live with and live out the ambiguity of both tending God's house and tending God's world. Always asking ourselves the questions of what is ego and what is devotion,

how much is enough and how much is too much. How beautiful and comfortable do we make this place, our own small cathedral built of faithfulness and devotion—and where do we draw the line and focus our attention and our resources outward? I can't give you the right answers, but I can tell you that faith communities live their faith most fully as they keep before them the questions, and pray and trust that the God who reminded David that God liked to be carried in, among, through and with the people is the God who lives with and through and among us today. We consider, we talk, we pray, we act, and then we question again. That is our faith, and our best chance to find the balance that honors both our love for God and for God's world. I would end with two quotations from estate documents that for me sum up the balance we seek.

First quote: Believing that there is room in the church for beauty as well as good works, I hereby bequeath to Pilgrim Congregational Church the sum of \$75,000 for a stained glass window to be installed behind the altar. Arthur Roberts, Duluth, MN 1977

Second quote: Since my husband, Arthur, has already remembered the church in such a way as to enhance its beauty, I hereby bequeath to Pilgrim Congregational church the sum of \$100,000.00 to be used in the church's outreach in any form the church should choose. Mary Roberts, Duluth, MN 1988

Thanks be to God. Amen.