

NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
1600 Mangrove Avenue, Suite 177
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11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship

“With Willing and Generous Hearts”

November 15, 2015

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Exodus 35: 4 - 29

Will you pray with me? Open our hearts to the voice of your Word, God, and free us from any shadows that cloud our relationship to you. Amen.

God’s people are journeying from slavery to freedom. God has given them a covenant - we call that covenant the Ten Commandments. In the covenant, God has said “I will be your God and you shall be my people. You shall have no other gods before me.”

Moses, the man God has chosen to be the leader of the people, meets with God on a regular basis. These meetings happen just about anywhere, but the really impressive ones happen at mountains. Moses goes up the mountain, God meets him there, and the mountain is covered with clouds and smoke. And all this scares the people. And, of course, there is another issue: where will they meet when there is no mountain nearby?

God’s issue is different. God does not want the people to be frightened of him. God wants a relationship with his people. Sure, the relationship should be a heart-based one, one the people experience from the inside out. Still, it would be nice to have a place where God and the people could meet, a place where God and Moses could meet. God figures this out before either the people or Moses do.

Now here’s the thing: it cannot be a fixed place. It has to be a portable place, a place that moves with the people for they are not yet in the land God is giving them. They are still moving through a wilderness. And God knows if they build a shrine, a monument, a fixed place and say “This is where we meet God,” they won’t keep moving. If they don’t keep moving, they will never see the fulfillment of God’s promise to them.

The solution, then, is a tent.

The call goes forth for all the people who are willing and generous to give something to create the tent and its furniture and sacred objects. There are two requirements in this capital campaign: that you have something to give and that you will give it voluntarily, with willing and generous hearts.

Maybe you have some materials to contribute - that works. We can use the wood, the linen, the metal. Maybe you have some skills to contribute - that works. We can use the carpenters, the spinners and weavers, the smiths.

No will force you to contribute. These are not membership dues. You won't be expelled if you don't contribute. Everyone is invited to contribute, but it is all voluntary.

So if you are stirred by the prospect of creating something together, stirred by the prospect of creating something beautiful for the whole community, stirred by the prospect of creating something beautiful for the whole community that celebrates God, then give what you can.

They gave. They gave their oils and spices and linen. They gave their wood and jewelry. They gave their skills and time.

They built a Tabernacle, a space set aside for meeting God. And it was portable. All the furniture and sacred objects had handles. The tents and poles could be taken down and carried. When they came to a place to camp, they built the Tabernacle. Then they set up camp with the Tabernacle in the center. There, they would offer their sacrifices to God. There, Moses would speak to them. And there, in the innermost part, God would meet Moses, no longer away on a mountaintop. Instead, they would meet in the midst of the people.

Artists over the years have made renderings of the Tabernacle. So these slides might give you a sense of how it looked. (A powerpoint slide show was displayed. Due to copyright matters, we are not able to make it available.)

When it was time to move on, the Tabernacle would go with the people. You see, God does not much like to be pinned down, boxed up, and contained. The purely practical aspect of having a portable sacred space also expresses a theological value: God does not like to be pinned down, boxed up, and contained by us. God likes to be on the move in the world.

Perhaps it is because of my love of the arts, or maybe it's because I like a successful fundraising drive. I just love this story, this story of a community coming together, with willing and generous hearts, to do something beautiful for God's sake.

I don't think God ordered the building of the Tabernacle for God's own needs. I think God knew doing this great thing together would strengthen their bonds with one another. Making things together builds community. God's vision for a people on a journey is not that they make some **thing**. God's vision for a people on a journey is that they **become** something that contributes to the well-being of the whole world.

Then there is this: the Tabernacle is a work of great beauty.

While I am sympathetic to concerns about excess, I am also sympathetic to the human need for beauty, how beauty appeals to us, feeds our spirit, gives us joy. Beauty does not have to be complex or expensive. It just has to be noticed.

Yesterday, I drove to Corning to pick up some olives, and I noticed the walnut trees are starting to turn their yellow gold, and it was beautiful. An artist friend and I were walking past a leafless dead shrub not long ago. To me, it needs to be dug up and discarded. But he stopped and said,

“Look how the branches are intertwined. You can’t see that when it has leaves. That’s really beautiful.”

When horror comes into the world, as it has again the last few days, in Paris and in Beirut, it is difficult to see beauty. Yet, for me, questing for it brings perspective to me, and a sense of peacefulness. Not complacency, but calmness. Perhaps finding beauty or making something beautiful in the midst of horror, is a form of resistance, a protest, a declaration to the perpetrators of horror that the human spirit, the genuine human spirit, is not so easily defeated.

I was first introduced to the great works of art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta around 1964. The High is named after Mr. and Mrs. J. M. High, who owned a department store. They donated their house to the museum association and the current museum stands on that very site.

There is a statute at the High that I visit on my trips to Atlanta. It is by the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin. It is called “The Shade.” It was given to the people of Atlanta by the French government. It exudes grief and sadness.

In June 1962, a plane crashed on takeoff at the airport in Paris. 122 people were killed. It was at that time the worst aviation disaster ever. 106 of those people were Atlantans, members of the museum association who had traveled to France to visit great art museums and buy works of art to display at the High Museum.

After a time of recovering from this great loss, Atlantans build a new arts center, the Memorial Arts Center, with a new museum, a new symphony hall, a new theater, a new arts college, all in memory of those 106 people.

The French government gave “The Shade” to the people of Atlanta. The French government owns all the molds Rodin created for his bronze sculptures. A new casting of a Rodin sculpture requires the consent of the French government. So the French government cast this statue, “The Shade,” gave that casting to the people of Atlanta, then they broke the mold so this would be the last casting of this sculpture ever made.

This figure is part of a trio Rodin created. At the Cantor Museum at Stanford, there is a casting of the trio, “The Shades.” These are large statues of muscular men, all pointing down, bent slightly as if weighed down, heads bowed as if grieving. I pulled up these photos yesterday and remembered, again, being there, seeing them, and wondering about their story. What has happened to make these men so very sad, so very weighed down, so full of grief and sadness?

(A powerpoint slide show was displayed of these statues.)

There is one thing I have never figured out about “The Shades.”

I have never figured out if they are crumbling downward in pain, or if they are rising up in determination. Oh, I am sure their hearts are overwhelmed with grief and sadness - their bodies tell me that. But I cannot figure out their movement, and although they are bronze, they are moving.

Today, I am certain they have just laid flowers outside a restaurant in Paris and are rising up to sing La Marsellaise, the French national anthem, through tears, which is sometimes the best way to sing.

I believe the Tabernacle God commissioned from the people on a journey from slavery to freedom was primarily a way of bringing the community closer together. God really doesn't need a tent or a temple. God does need people committed to God's vision for the world.

Religion that is true and pure and faithful doesn't kill people. Religion that is true and pure and faithful builds people up, invites them to live fully, and welcomes them into community. God needs communities to make God's vision a reality in the world. God has no hands but ours. God needs us. The world will change when we dream God's dream.

Amen.

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