



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Finding God's Houses

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1 Kings 8:(1,6,10-11), 22-30, 41-43

Ours is a very interesting age to be Christian here in America. And especially here in the University area where many of us dyed-in-the-wool church folks are so very likely to run into many people who consider themselves “spiritual and but not religious.” You’ve heard me say before that there was a study done here at UT that found that on a given Sunday a mere 2% of the student population is in church somewhere. That said, I can guarantee you that a great deal more than that 2% believe in a higher spiritual power and that many also have a lively sense of spiritual reality.

Beyond that, among the UT student population there is also here a palpable longing for contact with these greater depths of reality... within which we Christians have come to experience God. It is a deep hunger that, as Christians and every other religious stripe have always asserted, is a universal longing, a fundamental facet of every being human. As St. Augustine put it in his prayer, “Our hearts are restless **until** they **rest** in Thee, O Lord” and that restlessness is very much evident here.

Some of these students show up here at University Christian Church. In the next few weeks numbers of 1st yr. UT students, especially, are likely to show up at church because that’s what they’ve always done back home.... And it is early on, before for some of them their peers and their self-consciousness tell them that they

don't have to keep going to church anymore. They're collegians now. Many will convince themselves that Church was just a part of their former life, not where they could be blessed now that they are maturing in understanding.

Yes, some of them will find their way here and some of these will find what they are looking for, a way to connect with the spiritual depth that they seek.... A sense of the Presence of God in this House of God, what the Hebrew Scriptures call "glory," shekhinah, which in Hebrew translates as "where the Divine Presence settles, inhabits, or dwells."

Other students that come to church here are evidencing spiritual hunger, and now we are speaking especially of the "spiritual-but-not-very-religious," will perceive only the surface of worship: the ritual, the elevated music, a certain formality in dress and in tone which they do not understand is reverence and to which they do not wish to become accustomed. They will not be able to get beyond these surface impressions and heeding the urge to deepen their walk, they will go elsewhere in hopes of finding their connection. Let us all pray that each one of them will find that important connection.

At some level it has always been this way. In our long family story which as recorded is called the Bible, Abram and Sarai responded to hearing God's guidance to leave their home and go to a new land that God would provide for them. The word came to them bidding them go forward, leave family and familiar family ways behind. Follow this new God, this new dynamic God.

We should remember that this epiphany was a nomadic God that matched this newly nomadic people. As Abram and Sarai moved through the countryside towards the Promised Land they would sense the power of this God in the provision of food and water. They would sense this nomadic God going with them in the provision of protection from the wild animals and from hostile inhabitants of

the lands they were traversing.... All the way to their settlement in that Promised Land.

Many years later famine drove the Hebrews to seek food in Egypt. You remember that story of their enslavement there...their crying out to their God for help...for freedom.

It was not a tamed, settled God, some philosophically satisfying God that answered all questions for them, but what they needed for that time, as the story goes, a God who had power to change the natural world that made things happen in strange sometimes terrible ways: swarms of flies and plagues of frogs; the Nile River turning red as blood, and the firstborn children of the oppressing Egyptians dying while the Hebrew children survived. Whether it makes sense to our minds or whether such a God picture baffles us today, they saw the hand of God in all of these miraculous occurrences. Yes, throughout the Hebrew, Israelite, and Jewish traditions.....the central and defining act of this God was God's liberating the people from the Egyptian bondage and setting them free to follow the guidance of God through what would turn out to be 40 years of wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. So our foundational family story is that God is a liberating Power, a force for justice, and God is to be found working in the world. Where is God's house? Where does God reside? In the world, setting captive people, persecuted people free, that's where we find God's house, says our early family story.

You remember how Moses was given the 10 Commandments and how the people of Israel began carrying around those tablets in the Ark of the Covenant which was their first experience dabbling with a more settled God as they saw something very special in the presence of that mobile shrine. The Ark of the Covenant accompanied them into battle and time and again it was like a lucky rabbit's foot in that seemed to provide their side an advantage in the wars and skirmishes the Hebrew people engaged. They marched the Ark of the Covenant

around Jericho and the walls “came a’ tumbling down.”ⁱ On two occasions the Philistinesⁱⁱ captured the Ark of the Covenantⁱⁱⁱ but rather than bringing them benefits, it brought the Philistines trouble. They gave it back!^{iv} There was power in that Ark, power that the Hebrews loved. It seemed that God was living in that box, that shrine, somehow quite powerfully. That box was for them clearly, a House of God.

There is always this **tendency to try to harness God** to do our bidding and our work. Just as the Israelites had all but worshiped the Ark of the Covenant as the embodiment of God presence, at the same time they knew that God could never be so confined.^v What we see in the life of the Israelite people -- and in our own lives if we are perfectly honest, -- is a tendency to localize the presence of God in a place or in that particular action that we think we have identified, to see God on our side. We’ll even bend a lot of Truth and ignore a lot of Scripture to believe that, too.

Many years after Moses you will remember that it was Israel’s greatest king, David, who desired to build a House for God, a Temple, but was prevented from doing so by God’s own direction because of David’s misdeeds. It fell a generation later to David’s son, the wise King Solomon to build the first Temple in Jerusalem. It is the dedication of that Temple that is the context our morning’s Scripture reading.

And here I would like to pause for a moment and recognize the spiritual dynamic at play in our passage. We have Solomon speaking, or I should say, PRAYING aloud in verse 27 of chapter 8 saying, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Solomon understood that it was not going to be into this Temple that God would be confined, but it certainly would become a House of

God, in the best sense of the words, a place of special import where many would find a way... a deep way... to connect with the holy, with God.

Now, leaping over thousands of years to the present, we can recognize the same dynamic in our own lives. When we look over the ways in which we actually do come into the presence of the holy, it is usually not so much by finding any kind of prefabricated House of God in which we will naturally and easily slip into worship, and praise, and find ourselves being spiritually built up passively. No, most often spiritual blessing comes upon us when we find ourselves **building Houses of God**, developing local outposts of faithfulness that we call Church with the help of the Holy Spirit that will bless others in their relationship with God and by positive spiritual feedback, bless us as well.

For example, consider all of the workers who spent untold thousands of hours laboring to build Solomon's Temple thought about what they were doing. We don't have record, really, but we do know from records that those who did similar work having spent their lives building cathedrals all over Europe, saw theirs as a holy vocation. Since the vast majority of those crafts people would never live long enough to see the completion of their Cathedral, they were spending their lives, spilling their own sweat and sometimes their blood in an effort to glorify God, providing an awe inspiring edifice that honored God, that invited God, building space that could become for others who would visit it, sacred space. In doing so, these builders discovered their own work as a sacred vocation.

Let me suggest that what we need to be doing is be building houses, spaces, opportunities for the holy to break into our lives, and the Church is a natural place to start. Here is where we come to step out of busy week's schedule to stop, and remember who & whose we are;

- to get our bearings again;
- to hear the word of forgiveness;

- to hear the word of challenge to do justice in God's world;
- and to be charged once again to build a community here that both is doing God's work here and in the world; becoming a shining symbol of what true community can be.

Now, I love you in this church, more than you know, and truly, we are far along the road of becoming this symbol of true community. But honesty bids me to say that though we've come a long way, we've still got a long way to go. There is a lot that we can already identify as God's call to us, to grow into the fullness of our congregational possibility. And as we continue to inch closer to becoming the Church God calls us to become, the light will shine brighter, stronger, more attractively and we will see more of these new 1st yr. UT students saying, "there is something special going on at University Christian Church, something powerful and more than I expected; something that I want to be a part of, too."

Our Hymn of Invitation that we shall sing together later this morning says it so well:

**Let us build a house where love can dwell
 And all can safely live,
 A place where saints and children tell
 How hearts learn to forgive.
 Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
 Rock of faith and vault of grace;
 Here the love of Christ shall end divisions;
 All are welcome in this place.**

Let us be building this House of God!

Amen.

i Josh. 6:4-20

ii 1 Sam. 4:3-11

iii Ps. 78:61

iv 1 Sam. 5:7, 8

v This is documented by Graham Hancock in his book, *The Sign and the Seal*.