

You're Building What?

2 Samuel 7: 1-13 Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

In the town of Sedlec in the Czech Republic, there is a church called the Cemetery Church of All Saints. In 1278, Henry, the abbot of the Cistercian monastery in Sedlec, was sent to the Holy Land by King Otakar II of Bohemia. The abbot returned from the Holy Land with a small amount of earth he had removed from Golgotha and sprinkled it over the abbey cemetery. The word of this pious act soon spread and the cemetery in Sedlec became a desirable burial site throughout Central Europe, because who wouldn't want to be buried with this holy dirt, right? That's so Middle Ages.

Death was also very popular in the Middle Ages, a perfect complement to the activity of this now-sacred burial site. In the mid 14th century, the plague was reaping a staggering number of deaths. That was followed more locally to the Czechs by the Hussite Wars, pre-Reformation, pre-Luther reformers, followers of Jan Hus who fought off Catholic armies (yes, the Catholic had armies) five times when they weren't fighting among themselves between moderates and radicals. In all of this, the cemetery at Sedlec was truly booming and needed expansion.

Around 1400, just before death really hit its stride in Medieval Europe, a Gothic church was built in the center of the cemetery with a vaulted upper level and a lower chapel to be used as an ossuary for the mass graves unearthed during construction, or simply slated for demolition to make room for new burials. It's been estimated that over 40,000 skeletal remains were buried at the church at Sedlec.

It gets better. In 1870, someone gave the bright idea to a woodcarver named Frantisek Rint to do something with all of these bones. He created all kinds of decorative pieces uses bones and skulls, like a chandelier, pictorial designs, and wall designs. He even signed his work, as any good artist would, but he used bones arranged to form his name and the date of his work. Needless to say, the ossuary church in Sedlec has been used quite a bit for horror stories.

At some point, someone must have asked, *You're building what?*

Roughly in the middle of the 20th century, Walt Disney secured lots of acreage in central Florida. He had a vision for a community of tomorrow. However, Disney wasn't able to obtain funding and permission to start work on this Florida property until he first agreed to build Magic Kingdom. He died nearly five years *before* Magic Kingdom opened. The corporation's Imagineers knew that Walt had this vision for a modernist and futurist community, but couldn't figure it all out. They created a planned community called Celebration which eventually would become independent of the corporation, and they created an entertainment center that combines futurism with international themes. But they admitted that they really didn't know exactly how to fulfill Walt's vision. Perhaps this vision was bigger and bolder than any container that even the Imagineers could fathom. You can imagine what was said as they discussed design concepts for a billion dollar development: *You're building what?*

Let's see how this works out in the scripture lessons, beginning with the Second Samuel story about King David and the palace prophet, Nathan.

King David now has peace with his neighbors and strength in his nation. He has a nice palace ... with a great view. He thinks that God needs a palace or a temple, a nice place to live. Why is David the king if not to build a palace, or a temple, suitable for what David thinks God needs and wants?

David confers with his palace prophet Nathan who says that the king should do what he wants since God has been supporting him so fully; a way of saying, *How can you go wrong, O King?* Palace prophets tend to be "yes" men anyway. It's generally a very strategic move that enables you to keep your job in the palace and your head on your neck.

Well, Nathan gets a visit that night as God shares a few insights with the prophet who then repeats these words to David. It goes like this:

Nathan, Nathan, Nathan. You're building what? What are you thinking? Am I God or not? Don't you think I could get myself any kind of residence I wanted? Do you and David think that I'm incapable of taking care of myself? Did I even ask you to make me some residence? Like, ever? No, never!

Remind David of some facts. Tell him: You were a nobody out in the fields when I called you to be king. You didn't gain a single victory without me; I was there all the time. And I will be there with you in the future, too, relieving you of the pressure of your enemies, and helping you to prosper. I've got plans, lots and lots of plans. When I desire it, one of your heirs shall build my place. When that time comes, then there will be a house of the Lord, and not before.

This news from Nathan jolts David's expectations quite a bit, but the message is received. God is not to be domesticated, tamed, or cooped up in David's private pen. God will not obediently walk into some self-imposed confinement in a temple of David's design. God will not be subjected to David's plans. Period. End of discussion.

God also makes it clear that God's promise abides in his people, and in David. However, God also makes it abundantly clear that the promise will unfold on God's terms, fulfilling God's plan, and serving God's will. God will take care of God's people, but God will not be coerced, controlled, manipulated, persuaded, or cajoled into serving anyone else's agenda. Forget that; God and God's promise come on God's own terms. It also makes it clear where in the pecking of God's priorities building the house of the Lord is. That would be on the bottom; there are too many important things that need to happen before, and God needs David focused on that mission, not the building.

David's plan unravels and, while he may be disappointed, his prayer following the news from Nathan shows a new appreciation or a renewed appreciation for the nature of

his servanthood before God and God's kingdom. His plans, however grandiose, now pale in comparison to God and God's kingdom.

The passages from Mark 6 are the contrivance of the lectionary committee, the folks who have published a suggested series of scripture readings for every Sunday, running on a 3 year cycle – Year A, Year B, and Year C. Every time this has even come up in the past, I'm positive that I've selected another set of passages.

These selections are definitely odd. They are like two slices of bread with the ham and cheese removed from the middle. The gap in the readings consist two big events; the feeding of the five thousand, and Jesus walking on water in the storm. Every three years, I have to ask myself (along with most preachers, I'm sure), *what were they thinking?* It really seems I've been assigned two pieces that are like travelogue fluff – two slices of bread with no good stuff in the middle.

Travelogue piece number one precedes the feeding of the five thousand. We hear how Jesus tries to get them all away for a bit of a breather, a mini-retreat, so they can rejuvenate and recover their spiritual energy. They get in the boat and go. But, oops, they're seen when they leave for a desolate place (set-up for feeding of the five thousand) and recognized. Before you know it, people are running ahead of the boat. By the time the boat lands, crowds of people are swarming Jesus and the disciples, even though we really don't know what they want. They are simply drawn to Jesus, and he is compassionate in dealing with them –whatever that may be – and then the comment is made that they are *like sheep without a shepherd*. Okay.

Next section. All the big stuff has happened, and here they are getting out of the boat again. It says: *People at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.* So, they're besieged again with people, now sick ones. And the text continues: *And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.* Okay.

Well, let's ask the question: *You're building what, Jesus?* It isn't a temple. It isn't a synagogue. It isn't a church. It isn't a building at all. As in the passage from 2nd Samuel, God doesn't want your building. God wants the promise fulfilled. God wants, in these passages, ministry to be done. Teach, show real compassion, heal. Do that when you're not doing big stuff like feeding five thousand and walking on water. In fact, this teaching, compassion, and healing is your true mission.

It is what the faithful need to be building, not a building but a ministry with God's people. This ministry should be so visible and recognizable that you get swarmed wherever you go with people who want your teaching, your compassion, and your healing. They don't need or want your building, by the way. They don't need your building any more than God does. Nope, don't need it.

People are wondering why I'm not like other pastors, why I don't obsess with taking care of my church members and focusing almost entirely on their needs. Why am I involved in all kinds of community issues? Why am I reaching out to so many people who have almost nothing to do with this church? And why don't you fire me and get a real pastor who will do those things for you?

I was taught in school by Dr. Sharon Parks primarily, that if you were going to be a pastor, then you needed to know your pastorate. Unlike a chaplaincy where you focus your ministry attentions on the people of your defined field, like a prison chaplain, a hospital chaplain, or a hospice chaplain, a pastorate was a geographic space and included all of the people in that space. You needed to walk it, know it, and work it. In 18 years in Marion County, serving two churches and a non-profit, my pastorate has grown so that it seems to encompass most of the county.

And my ministry in that pastorate has become defined as going into those places and issues and occasions where no one else really wants to go and do leadership, working through relationships and experiences that have developed over those years, with the values of the kingdom leading me as best as I can understand them.

We may love our building and love our fellowship, but our ministry is to follow the model of Jesus. Jesus had no building – ‘the Son of Man has no place to lay his head,’ he said. His fellowship of believers walked with him and met him wherever he went, in swarms. Jesus had that vision of ministry that was like Disney’s mysterious vision for Epcot, bigger and bolder than even what his Imagineers could imagine and build. Jesus’ ministry is bigger and bolder than anything most churches can imagine. Buildings are a lot easier.

It's amazing that we have somewhere around 650 congregations in Marion County, not all of them Christian, but most of them. And Jesus never explicitly said to build a building. Most of the pastors are chaplains, tending to a distinct flock and only occasionally stepping outside what the building and its inhabitants have already defined. I have a feeling that a lot of the churches are like the first church in the Czech Republic that I mentioned, the one built from dead bones. Jesus talked about them, too, not favorably.

‘You’re building what?’ A ministry. That’s all Jesus wants, partners in ministry, his living body in the world, teaching, compassionate, and healing. No building necessary. Just a ministry for all whom God calls you to minister. Let them swarm.