

Pentecost 12 - Proper 16B
St. David's - August 23, 2009

As many of you are aware, Jean and I returned last week from a vacation in Maryland and Delaware. We spent much of that time with family, some of it in and around Annapolis and the rest at the ocean. A major goal for both Jean and me was to have the opportunity during this time to take part in communal and family celebrations, hopefully centered around some very specific local food items. From this standpoint I can tell you that the trip was a rousing success. I, in fact, spent the entire vacation eating nothing but these things; just picked corn on the cob, Maryland tomatoes, fresh peaches, steamed crabs and crabcakes, various forms of local submarine sandwiches, and a delicacy only to be found in Maryland and Pennsylvania, Utz potato chips. A perfectly balanced diet with all the food groups represented, don't you think? Talk about agape meals. Everyone of them was a Eucharistic experience.

Of course, it was not just family, food, and beach fun for me. My beloved wife gave me one of the great gifts ever, a special dispensation to abandon her family in the evenings so that I could enter the sanctuary of a baseball park. And when it was time for the reunion with my family, guess where we gathered together? That's right. What better place for the Keplinger clan to rendezvous than a ball yard. So one day I drove from Bethany Beach, Delaware to Norfolk, Va, the home of the AAA affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles to meet my dad, my sister and my niece at Harbor Park. Then the following week, 25 of my family members, including all my siblings, gathered at Camden Yards in Baltimore for Brad Bergeson T-shirt night, where we actually saw the

Orioles win a game, a major event in itself. How many families do you know that take their reunion portrait with a baseball mascot? The Oriole bird was nice enough to hang around to be in all those family pictures.

During our stay, I went to seven Oriole games, but I also attended minor league contests of the Oriole affiliates in Norfolk, Bowie, Frederick and Salisbury. As many of you know, this is a bit of a spiritual discipline and a retreat for me. From that first day at the age of five, when my mom lead me up the ramp in Memorial Stadium to see my first view of the field, something has always happened to me when I enter the confines of a baseball stadium. The closest sensation I can compare it to is the serenity I feel during our Taize' services over here. Sometimes the park is electric with energy, sometimes it is a more peaceful feeling, but I am always soothed by it. Though some may find this sacrilegious, for me there is a deep connection between what I feel every day when I walk into this sacred space of ours and the tranquility I experience as I enter a ballpark.

It was with this on my mind that I contemplated today's lessons. Both the reading from First Kings and Psalm 84 speak to us of the nature of sacred space, and the wonder of God's presence in such a place. In the case of First Kings, we hear a later generation nostalgically recalling the time when Solomon builds the temple with the express purpose of creating a literal home for God. These readings, combined with my own recent sensations in, of all places, a ball yard, had me asking these questions; "What makes a space sacred? Does God enter some spaces and not others? Does a church or a temple automatically contain the presence of God? Finally, should your Rector be burned at the stake for suggesting the heretical notion that God can be found

at a baseball game?

Solomon apparently struggles with the same theological conundrums, even while he is having the bodacious temple built. Some might suggest that there is some historical/critical analysis that suggests he really did not consider my baseball stadium question, but the rest do apply. He wonders about God's presence, asking the question today, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you," he prays, "much less the house that I have built!"

Solomon's comment offers some clue as to why he believes building the temple is the most important undertaking of his life. The Hebrews had to that point mostly experienced a God of transcendence, a God who lived far away from them in the heavens. Only on a few rare occurrences, as with Moses on Mount Sinai, did God leave that far away place to interact with them on a more personal level.

That, of course, is how all religions of the day had experienced divinity, as something or someone far, far away from the tangible world. It was those few very personal experiences of God that made the Hebrew God different from their neighbors. Solomon's theological progression therefore seems logical enough. "If God is with us on earth sometimes, maybe," he thought, "God could be with us all the time." This deep desire to build the temple seems to me to express the early Hebrew yearning for a God of intimacy in their lives, not unlike our own desire for such a presence with us today. They wanted a God who would be with them all the time, just like in the good old days.

It is a lofty goal. But who can quarrel with Solomon for wanting to bring God to

the people in a real and personal way, a God they could experience every time they walked in the temple? It is only because we know the end of the story that we realize there is a problem with such an understanding of our relationship to God. If you believe that God is present in a special way in a temple or a church, what happens when that temple is destroyed? What happens to the people when God's home on earth is taken away? That, of course, remains the issue in the Middle East to this day. If three religious traditions claim one location on earth as being more sacred than other places because of the special presence of God there, we don't have to imagine the disastrous consequences that will follow. We have seen them first hand.

Armed with hindsight, we can discover the flaw in Solomon's theology, and I think it is visible in his own question today. If God cannot be contained even in the heavens, how could we possibly imagine that God could be contained in a temple or in our churches or in all of the churches and temples of the world combined? God, as Solomon states, is far beyond all that. The God that our ancestors experienced, the God you and I know, is a God who is both far beyond us and simultaneously with us, a God that is present in our churches, but also in our homes and our schools and our places of business and perhaps even, in a baseball stadium. With a theology of God's presence throughout the world, the destruction of a temple is still a sad event, but it no longer threatens the existence of a religion and its people.

This was reinforced for me in those minor league parks I visited. Each of them had the typical advertisements for local businesses on the fences and walls of the outfield. But I also noticed that there was one particular advertisement that appeared

in all four parks. It was a billboard for Ken Burns' upcoming series entitled, "The National Parks; America's Best Idea." I saw Ken on a talk show this week hawking the series that begins next month on PBS. As he described what he tried to accomplish in this documentary, he referred to those parcels of land that we have set aside as a country for perpetuity as "sanctuaries." He called our National Parks, "the places where we can be with God." Of course, I believe Ken Burns has that exactly right. None of us in this parish have to be convinced that God is absolutely present in a real and tangible way in the beauty of creation. There is good reason why we often use the word sanctuary or temple to speak both of this space in which we sit now as well as those special places in creation that are so prevalent around us here in Page. Each connects us to God in a special way. Each offers the opportunity to sit in the place where God dwells and know God in a way we could not otherwise.

So if we are all so certain that these things are true and that God does not need for us to build God a dwelling place on earth, we need to ask the logical question. Why are we doing it? If God is present in Creation and can be experienced in many ways in daily life, do we need a church building at all? For centuries, the answer to this has been that we need to build monuments to God, that as a human race we need to express our devotion to God through our art and in the form of a building. But if we truly believe in panentheism, "pan" meaning everything, en - meaning in, theos - God, that everything is in God, why are we trying to make special places for God to reside? I hope the answer is that we are not. I hope the reason we continue to build churches is no longer that we feel a need to construct a dwelling place for God, but rather that we

realize that we need such buildings for ourselves. We do need them, because as human beings, we continue to need focal points, we need access points and windows to God. Creation offers us one of those access points, but churches remind us that the path to God is not just a solitary one. We discover and experience God not just through nature, but through the gift of one another. Churches therefore, remain critical in helping us avoid what our Presiding Bishop referred at General Convention as “the great Western heresy - that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God.” Yes, we absolutely experience God in Creation. But there is no “me” in Christian faith. It can only be “us.”

Churches, then, offer the potential to form us as the beloved community of Christ, pointing us together toward God. Sometimes however, churches move from being windows to the divine, into the divine themselves. That is idol worshiping and it separates us from the sacred rather than uniting us with it. Whenever a church building becomes more important than our mission to create God’s reign, we know we are in trouble. In a similar way, whenever a church becomes a barrier to protect us from the world, rather than an entree to be a part of God’s world, we have forgotten the lesson that God is everywhere and is a part of everything. When church buildings are truly windows to the divine, they will connect us with the world and never separate us from it, having doors that not only open for everyone to enter, but also catapults to propel us back into that world where God resides everywhere. They must also always point us beyond themselves to the reality of God.

It is with all those considerations in mind that this sanctuary became a reality last

year. Our wall opens completely to the presence of God in creation surrounding us. The connection of the outdoor fountain to the indoor font reminds us of our baptismal call to bring God's reign into the world. The ceiling brings God's transcendent light from above. The glass doors remind us that we are never separated from the world around us. The circular space links us as a community of faith, intimately connected not just to God, but to one another.

None of that however, is what makes this building St. David's. None of that is the reason that we feel God's presence here in such an intimate way. The reason that this is sacred space only becomes fully clear when we get to today's Gospel. It is here that Jesus describes to us a potential relationship with God that is so far beyond that hoped for by Solomon in building a temple and so far beyond the image in Psalm 84 that it is actually scary. It is so scary, that we hear that today some of the disciples abandon ship. What Jesus describes is a relationship with God that is so much more intimate that we could experience in a church or in nature. It is in fact, a carnal relationship, a relationship so intense and so sensual that our human flesh becomes one with God. We are not just with God in God's dwelling place, but we are actually in God's body, in the Body of Christ. We, in fact, become the Body of Christ. God is in us, we are in God, and we are in each other.

That, beloved, is why this church building is so saturated with sacredness. God is here because the Body of Christ is here. God is here because you are here, because you are that Body, here for each other and here for the world.

It is no wonder that many of the disciples could no longer follow Jesus after this.

It was one thing to believe that God was in Jesus, but to accept that God was in them? That would mean believing that their lives were sacred, that they too were the Body of Christ, called to be bread for an entire world. That would mean accepting that their lives were full of meaning and that they could make a difference for others. It would mean realizing that not only did God love them, but that God was a part of them.

Beloved, for some, coming into this church building takes a great leap of courage. It is not always easy in our lives to walk in and experience the reality of the presence of God in our lives. But that is only the beginning. Because today Jesus tells us that God's ultimate dwelling place is not just in here... but in here. Coming to this table is not for wimps, but if you can muster the courage, the experience you can have will be even more pronounced than sitting down to a meal of corn on the cob, Maryland tomatoes, fresh peaches and steamed crabs.

This is the real deal. This is the real meal. A meal that will take you to God's ultimate destination, the most lovely dwelling place possible, your own heart and soul. Amen.