

1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:17-20
(Haggai 2:1-9; John 2:13-22)
“You Are God’s Temple”

Introduction

Pentecost seems often to fall on Memorial Day, when we remember and give thanks for those who sacrificed their lives so that we might be free. How appropriate this weekend also to remember and give thanks for the Holy Spirit of God, who brings us the freedom from sin and death that Christ won for us in his death and victory on our behalf.

God’s great promise to his people, from Abraham on, was that he would be with them and would never forsake them. This promise was repeated to Abraham’s descendents, to Moses and the people of Israel, and to David and his descendants. It was made visible to God’s people in the cloud and pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness, in the fire and smoke that covered Mt. Sinai, and in the glory cloud that completely filled both the tabernacle and the temple that replaced it.

But Israel grew tragically accustomed to God’s presence and repeatedly broke covenant with him. As many times as God forgave them and restored them, they again turned away, until at last he delivered them into the hands of their enemies and let them be carried away into exile. Their enemies desecrated and destroyed the temple, and for seventy years the land enjoyed its rest. During Israel’s exile in Babylon, Ezekiel prophesied that one day the temple would be rebuilt and the glory of God would return and dwell in the midst of his people.

But when at last the people returned and rebuilt the temple, the glory of God did *not* again fill the holy place. There was no overwhelmingly visible mark of God’s presence in the midst of his people. So in our first Scripture lesson, we heard the prophet Haggai depict the sadness of those who remembered the former glory of Solomon’s temple and grieved that the new temple had no such glory. What was Israel to make of the unfulfilled promise that God’s glory would return and he would again dwell among his people?

The answer came in two stages: first, when Jesus entered the Temple, God incarnate inhabited the Temple more clearly and visibly than ever before although, tragically and ironically, the religious leaders did not recognize him. Truly, “He came to his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). And, secondly, as Paul explains in the verses of our text, God’s aim in the new covenant was no longer to dwell in buildings, but rather to dwell in the midst of his new covenant community, and even to dwell in the individuals who make up that community. At Pentecost, God’s glory came down, not to a place, but to people, not fire on the mountain or in the holy of holies, but on the heads and in the hearts of his disciples.

Our final destiny is not heaven, but heaven on earth – the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven when God makes his home with humanity. In this present age, both the

Church and the Christian individual are to be a place where the future is made visibly present and may be experienced. In the new covenant, we together – as the Church of Jesus Christ – are the temple of God, and we individually – as Christian persons – are the temple of God. When at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out upon God’s people, they – and “they” includes us – became in both these senses the temple of God’s Spirit. Look with me at two consequences of Pentecost that are emphasized in our text.

Body

1. First, because God inhabits his Church, we must strive together for peace and unity (3:16-17).

Too often this text has been understood incorrectly as referring to the believer’s body and has been used as a text against suicide. But Paul is quite clearly speaking here in chapter three about the Christian community in Corinth and the scandal of its divisions. He insists that the church in Corinth, the Christian community, is itself the temple of God’s Spirit, the place where God dwells and desires to dwell so visibly that the world will be drawn to his love as it sees how these Christians love each other. The problem at Corinth was that the Christians were torn apart by division. Paul says, “Stop it! If you keep on destroying God’s temple in Corinth, tearing his church apart, God will destroy you.”

This is particularly applicable to us when we identify ourselves with certain teachers or perspectives or denominations or groups. We become part of something good, or follow someone godly, and then make an idol of that identification and begin to stigmatize and separate from all who disagree with us. That was the context in Corinth. Greatly gifted Christians were arguing over the teaching of Paul versus Apollos versus Peter. Rather than finding their identity in Christ alone and then taking the best from their teachers, they divided into cliques and began fighting over the perceived emphases of each teacher, as happens today when people identify with and debate the relative merits of being Presbyterian versus Baptist versus Methodist, or being Calvinist versus Arminian. “Stop it!” says Paul. Because truth matters, it is right to have principled discussion and debate and to hold reasoned positions on such things. But it is sin to divide into competing camps that fight and destroy the church’s unity and witness.

Think of all the reasons we fight and divide and refuse to sit down and be reconciled to each other. The world often rejects the gospel simply because of our fights and divisions. Thus Jesus prayed that we might be one, “that the world may know” that the Father sent him into the world (see John 17:21&23). These verses rebuke all forms of proud individualism that reject the crucial importance and value, indeed the intrinsic necessity, of Christian community.

2. Secondly, because God inhabits each Christian, we must each strive for not only for unity, but also for personal purity (6:16-20).

These verses rebuke all forms of collectivism and communalism that deny the value of the individual Christian. Here Paul *is* speaking of the individual Christian, and of the believer's body. He wants us to realize that not only is the church family a temple of God's Spirit, but that God also dwells in each of his people, making our bodies his temple. He wants us to recognize our union with Christ (6:17), and thus to recognize the importance of doing nothing that will defile his temple and so grieve the Spirit who dwells in us.

This is particularly challenging when we have improper views of Christian freedom. Paul's teaching on freedom in Christ often leads people to assume mistakenly that we are free to do whatever we like. Too often we think of salvation merely in terms of forgiveness. That is quite different from thinking of God as *in me*, intimately involved in everything I chose to do, whether taking drugs or getting drunk, or looking at pornography or indulging in immoral sexual behavior, or doing business dishonestly, or lying to people. When Christians do such things we defile and desecrate God's temple and grieve God's Spirit.

Here in chapter six, Paul emphasizes the corrosive nature of sexual immorality, and reminds us that Christ has bought our bodies with the sacrifice of his own body. If we want to enjoy the presence and power of God's Spirit, we must heed Paul's admonition, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (6:19-20).

Conclusion

What, then, are we to take away from this on this holiday weekend? At least these two things: *First*, God cares deeply about the peace and unity of his people. If we are fighting with each other, distrusting each other, refusing to work toward visible unity for the sake of God's honor within the world, we destroy the church's witness and grieve God's Spirit. And *secondly*, if we are careless about sin and think that because we are free from the law that we can now do whatever we like and then just ask for forgiveness, we grieve God's Spirit. *When we do not seek both unity within the church and purity within our own lives, we hold back the mighty work of the Holy Spirit that God desires to do in and through his church and his people for the sake of the world.*

How often we bemoan the state of the world and do not realize that it is because of us, because we have failed to be what God has called us to be: his own temple, the place where his glory is seen and his presence experienced. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (3:16). "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (6:19-20).

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