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Deuteronomy 12:5-7*-/ ESV.

⁵ But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, ⁶ and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. ⁷ And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

The Temple is Gone: *The fragmentation of Faith.*

We've talked about the transition from Temple Judaism to Synagogue Judaism, otherwise known as Rabbinic Judaism. I thought that I was done talking about the Temple and synagogues, but very recently, something inspired me to return to the topic. As a very brief summary, animals could only be sacrificed in the Temple and in 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed the Second and last Temple. The priests who had been in charge of the Temple held hereditary positions. Now, they could no longer sell animals to be sacrificed. Worship moved to the synagogue system, already largely in place. Rabbis took over in the synagogues. Rabbis had much greater scholarly training and were able to more wisely interpret the law. The Talmud, an extremely large collection of Israelite and Jewish folklore, philosophy,

theology and ethics, and of Torah interpretation, began to be formed. It was not completed until after the year 500 A.D. The synagogue system was expanding after the destruction of the Second Temple, and at the same time, the Christian Church system began to develop, modeled in large part after the neighborhood synagogue concept. The God of the Jews was now also the God of the Gentiles, and the early evangelists were committed to spreading the word that Jesus is the Messiah. People like Peter and Paul were not trying to start a new religion.

But there is an issue relating to the concept of the Temple itself that we have not looked at. Consider Deuteronomy, Chapter 12, verses 5 to 7:

⁵ But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, ⁶ and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. ⁷ And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you.

The Torah makes it clear that all sacrifices are to be offered in the Temple, nowhere else. Further, all Jews in the Holy Land were required to travel to Jerusalem for at least the three major festivals of Passover, which celebrates the escape from Egypt, Shavuot (*shugvoo-owt*), which commemorates the handing of the Torah to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, and Sukkot (*sookowt*), which celebrates the 40 years of wandering in the desert after escaping Egypt. There

were four other major festivals, and many Jews traveled to Jerusalem to the Temple to celebrate them. But in the time of Jesus, there already were many Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and all they could do was worship in synagogues. In fact, remember that the First Temple, Solomon's Temple, had been destroyed in the year 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, and the Second Temple wasn't built until 516 B.C. What did Jews do during the 70-year gap? I don't want to get into a detailed historical discussion, but there is evidence within the Bible and on archeological artifacts that synagogues were used during this period. In other words, the synagogue system is very ancient and was not built simply as a response to the destruction of the two Temples. But it is believed that the destruction of the First Temple caused the synagogue system to rapidly expand.

Consider the English word "synagogue". It is a transliteration of the Greek word "*synagōgē*". The word means "collecting" or "bringing together" or "assembling". At the time of Jesus, when the Second Temple still existed, synagogues were used for worship, praying, studying Scripture, Jewish education, and various secular community activities. You can see why the synagogue system made a good model for the development of the church system. Even the physical structure of synagogues influenced early church buildings. There was a central hall supported by columns, benches to sit on, a raised platform for speakers, and

floors that were covered with mosaics and carvings. But the first known church buildings that were built specifically for this use are dated to the early 200's. Before that, people's houses were used, and occasionally, an unused synagogue was retargeted as a church building.

But what about the Temple concept? The early Roman and Orthodox Christian churches did have Cathedrals, which in some ways were like Temples. They served as regional gathering places. Later, some Protestants, like Anglicans and Lutherans, built cathedrals. But today, most Christians only worship in local churches. There are many very large local churches, but they are not meant as regional gathering places, in the way that Temples or Cathedrals complement neighborhood churches. We'll get back to this, but first, I want to tell you about a man I met at SFO, the airport in San Francisco, when Wendy and I were coming back from her niece's wedding celebration.

I never asked him his name, so we'll call him Ted. Ted was about forty years old. While we were waiting for our flight, I noticed a man very intently reading. It was a small book, fairly thick, opened wide on the table next to his chair. He was bent over the pages. He had the hubbub around him tuned out. He was thinking only of his reading. I realized that he was reading a Bible. I looked at him for several seconds, and then he looked up and caught my eye. I smiled and nodded.

He motioned for me to come over. I told him I was a pastor. Here is what he was reading. It's from the Gospel of John, Chapter 2:

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Jesus is angered at the Temple being used as a place of business by corrupt money changers and priests. They were selling animals for sacrificing – at exaggerated rates - and also charging to exchange Roman and Greek money, the money that average people carried, into shekels. Although it is not in the Bible, the priests only allowed people to buy animals with shekels, and so they were extorting poor people. Then Jesus says, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"*. He is referring to his own body as a Temple. And it did indeed take three days to raise the Temple of his body up from the dead. The point though is that Jesus is changing the meaning of the world Temple. Jesus, who on multiple occasions had taught in the Temple, now calls himself a Temple. In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 6, Paul

is arguing for us to behave like Christians, to live each day in a way that reflects our faith. Paul then extends Jesus' statement of being a Temple to us:

¹⁹ Or 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, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Remember that the Temple, unlike individual synagogues, was the home of God. That is where you went to literally find God. Now, we are being told that if you are a believer, God lives within you, in the form of the Holy Spirit. We are thus Temples. This is a central theme in Christianity, and there is a lot a merit to this perspective. It reminds us that we don't have to go anywhere to find God, that God is indeed alive within us. It reminds us that when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles before they went off on their evangelistic missions, the Holy Spirit also began to descend upon each believer. But here is a twist to this: most scholars see the "you" in this statement of Paul to the believers in Corinth, in a letter we are confident he personally wrote, to be plural. He is speaking of the corporate body of believers as a whole. We are the new Temple. If each of us attempts to be a Temple on our own, we're going to run into a problem: A Temple is two things, the home of God and a meeting place for the faithful. This is a concept that has become lost among modern Christians. We need to be able to come together as a community of believers to support each other and to grow each other's faith.

The modern Christian Church, including the large majority of Protestant and nondenominational churches, is highly decentralized. There are good things about this. Local churches make it easy for a person or a family to find a church that suits their spiritual and social needs. With lots of churches to choose from, people can find a church that reflects their ritualistic preferences. Smaller churches do a better job of serving the individual needs of people. But belonging only to a local church does give us a narrow and sometimes isolated perspective. Christianity does not consist of a large federation of disconnected sects and churches. We are a global web, with every Christian connected to every other Christian by our common faith. Another problem with the proliferation of individual, independent churches is that it more readily allows unorthodox, unbiblical interpretations of Jesus' teachings, of the Old and New Testaments. As a hospital chaplain, I have come across many Christians with beliefs that are radical and not at all in line with true Bible interpretation. Perhaps, although we can't practically do this physically, we could meet periodically for large, unified Temple-like services with Christians from a broad spectrum of church styles. We might stop being angrily divided over what are often political and not theological differences. I'll get back to how to do this.

I sat down next to Ted in the airport. He told me that he was reading the passage about the Temple because he realized that he no longer felt like he was

part of a vast global Christian community. He was on his way to a funeral for his father but had had an argument with his brother over the phone while they were planning the service. Ted had innocently quoted a passage of the Bible to his Christian brother, something he wanted included in the service. But Ted had taken it from the NIV, the New International Version. His brother had loudly declared that his church believed that the King James Version, written in 1611, was the only true word of God. Even trying to alter it by looking at original Greek or Hebrew manuscripts was considered improper. Never mind that the King James is based in part on the Latin Vulgate, and that it was written in part to feel majestic and rhythmic, as opposed to completely accurate. Ted's brother had demanded that the only Bible used in their father's funeral be the King James. Ted, not wanting conflict with his brother, had relented. Now, he was reading John in the airport, wishing that there was some sort of shared vision of Christian faith that could hold him and his brother, and all Christians, together. At a time when Faith seems under threat, Ted worried that division in the global, as well as the national, church would only do further harm to the world of the faithful. He wished that we could focus on our shared belief in the Messiah - and not argue.

There is a notion in the Methodist Church called "Connectionism". The idea is that local churches are not isolated. We are there for each other in mutual

support, under a common leadership, and with a shared, guiding sense of Christian theology. As Methodists, we have traditionally shared more than we do now. The sense of unity among our individual churches has fallen away a good bit. The one huge thing that bonds us together is our common root in the teachings of John Wesley – who founded “Methodism” and initiated a new Church denomination without meaning to. He served in the late 1700’s, and wrote long, deeply thought-out, highly theological sermons, ones that are often very difficult for modern readers to understand. They are a lot to slog to get through, but they are insightful. His core belief is that we are saved by grace, born with grace within us, and that this grace draws us to God and to each other. We are there for both mutual support and mutual accountability. He was strong on singing; his brother Charles Wesley wrote between 6,000 and 10,000 hymns, including *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. Recent divisions in the Methodist Church have done a lot of harm to our sense of connectionism. Many churches have very limited ongoing contact with the Conference, the International United Methodist Church, or other Methodist churches. But that notion of “Connectionism” was meant to form a sort of Temple, where we all come together in mutual support to honor God.

In the letter to the Colossians, the author (who is nominally Paul, but is probably some other, unknown person), the author tells us:

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This tells us how we should be connected to each other. I won't bother to summarize, as the passage speaks for itself. Our challenge today is to somehow reinvent that shared Temple feeling, where there is a place where all the faithful can gather. There are 3D virtual reality environments where people can enter as avatars and meet as a group, to talk, pray, sing, and practice shared rituals. The participants can be anywhere on the Internet. I build these environments myself. Perhaps we should be using social media to create a truly connected Church instead of using technology to voice cruel feelings without any sense of accountability, which is, of course, very unchristian and an extremely common use of social media.

When Christians meet in the Temple we need to focus on what really matters. I suggested to Ted that he might make a point of being very energetic about reading the Bible passages from the King James Version and let his brother know that their bond as Christians, and not some Bible translation, is what matters.