

“Holy Temple, Righteous Foundation”
Sermon Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Psalm 119:33–40, I Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23
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As you may know, the whole of Psalm 119 is the longest in the Bible. 176 verses long, to be exact! And all of it extolling the *torah*—the law—in one way or another. Not only does it sing the praises of God’s law, but it’s constructed in a very tight, shall we say, *legalistic*, structure: It is an *acrostic* poem, meaning that the first letter of each line follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. In this case, the acrostic is grouped into eight-line sections, so that each of the first eight lines starts with *alef*, each of the second eight lines starts with *beth*, etc., etc. This week’s lectionary reading is the *he* section, meaning that, in Hebrew, each of these eight lines begins with the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

At least one commentator has suggested that this long, tightly structured poem is **beyond overkill**; it is a joke. After all, who loves law *that* much? Especially if King David happened to be the unknown author of this psalm. He’s the one who arranged to have Bathsheba’s husband killed at war so that he could take her as his own wife! Talk about mocking the law and his authority as king! Probably none of *us* has the power to enact such a scenario. But, to bring it down to day-to-day secular terms, can you ever imagine yourselves extolling the speed limits on our roads? Or the carry-on baggage and liquid limitations at the airport? Or any number of other laws and rules that inconvenience us and confine our behaviors? Seems a little absurd, right?

Nevertheless, I happen to disagree with that commentator. And largely on the basis of the psalmist’s imagery and language. He speaks about the heart and the eyes, about delight and fear, about the giving of life and about righteousness. These are important words and concepts,

particularly in the psalmist's Hebrew context. The heart alone was so laden with meaning that it encompassed physical health, emotions, wisdom, and conscience. In 21st Century terms, that might translate as "mind-body-spirit." The heart was the center of all these aspects of our selves, our very humanity. Righteousness and the giving of life, on the other hand, were and are qualities and gifts of the divine. While delight and fear--or awe--are our proper human responses to God's presence in our lives, including the law.

It seems to me that the psalmist here is earnestly imploring God for teaching and knowledge about the law, asking, "Why?" and begging, "Please help me to understand." "I know this is supposed to be good for me, but remind me how, exactly?" We all know how difficult it is for kids to hear the response, "Because I said so," to their "why" tests of parental authority's limits. And I'm not sure that it gets much easier as adults to try to follow instructions that feel arbitrary. But at least we have gained an understanding of the reasoning behind many of the laws we follow. Unfortunately that is sometimes as a result of experiencing, first or secondhand, what happens when they're *not* followed. A speeding ticket is one thing. An accident, particularly involving injuries and other people, is another thing entirely. At their best, laws and rules, whether of God or parents, church or state, exist to keep us, not just orderly, but safe.

For Christians, Jesus **brought the reason beneath all the reasons**. Many laws boiled down to just two, a righteous foundation: Love God. And love our neighbor as ourselves. Love God by emulating God: the righteousness and self-giving that is God and was modeled for us on earth by Jesus. Love our neighbors as part of that emulation. But also because God created and loves us and our neighbors equally, even and perhaps especially the disadvantaged...and the ones with

whom we disagree or who never cease to “bug” us. Offering us mirrors in which to examine and act upon our own humanity and potential for self-giving.

Now, I’d like to clarify here that none of this is intended to extol the virtues of tee-totaling **legalism** or **self-righteousness**. We know that in the course of Jesus’ ministry he and his disciples broke rules. Over and against Jewish purity standards, they were known to eat without first ritually washing. They healed people on the Sabbath when God had commanded them to rest. They used the two new rules to gauge what was essential—what was at the heart of God, and they prioritized accordingly. Minister and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer did the same when he decided to plot against Hitler’s life in order to redeem the lives of the *fuehrer*’s many innocent victims. Knowing the risks, Bonhoeffer paid with his life. And so you see, there is freedom that comes with obedience to the two laws in Christ...but also much responsibility and potentially great cost. Thankfully, not all of us will pay with our lives, but we must come to the table knowing that there is indeed a price associated with Christian discipleship.

It was upon this righteous Christ-foundation that the early Church was built: the witness of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection: his intimate walk with God, his acts of healing, self giving, and sacrifice, the integrity of his person: Mind, body, and spirit perfectly attuned to and aligned with the heart and the mind of God. A trusty cornerstone, if ever there was one, the foundation of God’s holy temple.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I was raised believing that these words from Paul—“God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”—referred to my body and the bodies of every other curious, limit-testing teenager. That God’s warning about those who destroy the temple was akin

to the anti-smoking messages on TV, the egg frying in the skillet that was supposed to be our brains on drugs, and the scary, pre-prom “Don’t drink and drive” movies. I don’t doubt that Paul or God would support these causes’ intentions of keeping us safe, healthy, and alive. Nor do I doubt that both would encourage us to hold the physical bodies God gave us with the utmost care, respect, and awe, worthy of a holy temple of God. But, come to find out, the original language Paul used was in the plural, as in **you collectively** are God’s temple. When you come together **as the Church**, you are God’s temple, and God’s Spirit dwells in and amongst you. Paul uses the metaphor of a building, but he is speaking of the people, not the structure, as the personal assets that comprise the holy temple. It certainly is a beautiful image, and yet it can be a challenging one as well. With all the harm we know has been spoken and done in the name of the Church. With the hurtful, exclusive rules **humans** have enacted on behalf of God and the Church. With the ways even progressive Christians can hurt and even sever the sacred ties that unite and bind us with gossip, careless words and deeds. We are not immune either, but that doesn’t mean that holiness does not live here. As the gospel of Matthew reminds us, wherever two or more come together in his name, the Christ, our foundation, is indeed present.

Perhaps the secret lies in part in awareness. While we may be okay with letting our deepest, most profound questions go unanswered, I’m not so sure that we have that same comfort level with the mystery of the sacred or the awe and wonder that come with a heightened awareness of its presence. Out in nature, fine. God’s grandeur is everywhere, in the lakes and the forests, the birds and the critters. That’s a concrete that’s easy to interact with, conceptualize, and love.

In the sanctuary, not as much... Unless we happen to be looking out at spring blossoms or autumn leaves on our tree friends outside these windows. We can’t help but squirm a little bit here. Maybe it’s easier in higher churches, where statues and icons, bells and incense give clear

signals, “This is a holy time. This is a holy place.” I have to admit that, as a visual person, I love all those things. Frankly, they make me cry, which for me is the height of a spiritual experience. What we’ve got in our sanctuary is far more minimalist, but it highlights Paul’s message perfectly: The holy temple is the people, not the accoutrements.

Perhaps another piece lies in recalling our UCC heritage. As much as we embrace the **autonomy** of our denomination, --which gives us the freedom to explore our own theologies as individuals and structure and lead our local church as we see fit—there is a second major UCC building block, **covenant**. We covenant with one another as members when we join the local church. As a local church in the United Church of Christ denomination, we covenant with the local association, the state-wide conference, and the national General Synod. As a minister, I also covenant individually with the association, where I hold my standing as an ordained minister. I promise to uphold certain professional and ethical standards in my role here, just as we, as a congregation, agree to follow certain denominational guidelines, all of these things devised to make and keep us healthy. Covenants extend across our entire Judeo-Christian heritage, connecting us with God, the Church universal, and our Hebrew religious ancestors. They are indeed sacred, at once **concrete and transcendent**, calling us to live into the holy temple that we are and to be true to the righteous foundation upon which we stand.

May we always celebrate our freedom to vision and discern, while exercising our covenantal responsibilities to one another and God.

May it be so. Amen.