

## People Who Would Destroy God's Temple

I Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 & Matthew 5:38-48

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Pastor Tom Thews

### 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

<sup>18</sup> Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." <sup>21</sup> So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

### Matthew 5:38-48 (NIV)

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

## People Who Would Destroy God's Temple

Peter Hanson once gave a speech in which he told what a moving experience it was even for him, a Canadian, to visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. This was not long after that memorial was constructed. Hanson described watching crowds of people of all ages reach up to touch that cold wall of black granite rising out of the ground, containing the names of every American soldier known to have died in that tragic conflict — all 58,307 of them.

Hanson said some people who came to visit the memorial just stood and stared. Others broke down and wept. “Why?” they all seemed to be asking. Fifty-eight thousand young men taken from loving families to fight a war that many found difficult to justify. Fifty-eight thousand American soldiers who would never return home. Fifty-eight thousand brave young men slain in that terrible conflict.

But Peter Hanson wasn’t giving this speech to debate the merits of the Vietnam War. He was making another point. Hanson continued, “Fifty-eight thousand — that is also the number of Americans who are killed by cigarettes every eight weeks.”

That will make you think, won’t it? Fifty-eight thousand people — every eight weeks. People dying because of the harmful effects of nicotine.

Please don’t think my goal is to pick on cigarette smokers this Sunday. I was just blown away by the dramatic picture Peter Hanson gives us of this particular health problem.

It reminds me of the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. He writes, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple?” What a sad thing when any human being abuses his or her body in anyway, be it by smoking, drinking, overeating, drugs, in whatever way. We are God’s temple. Think about what that means.

That is one way St. Paul used the imagery of followers of Christ as the Temple of God. He is telling us to take care of our body, for that body is where God abides. In I Corinthians 6:19-20 he writes: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

That is one way in which St. Paul says we are the Temple of God. But there is another that is found in today’s lesson in chapter 3 of this same epistle. Paul is writing to the Corinthian church — a church in conflict. The source of this conflict? Some in the church are claiming to be followers of Paul while others are claiming to be followers of Apollos, a skilled preacher much admired in the early church.

In other words, some of the members are still linked to their former pastor and will not accept the current pastor while some others in the congregation have now grown close to the new pastor and are saying bad things about his predecessor. That happens, doesn’t it? Oh, not in our church, of course. But I’ve heard of it happening in other churches.

We’re human beings. We all have different preferences. We have different needs. And we respond to different personalities. It’s human, but it can also be destructive. It can tear up a church.

Paul counsels the church at Corinth to grow up. “Who is Paul?” he asks. “Who is Apollos? Paul plants, Apollos waters, but,” he notes in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “it is God who gives the growth.”

In this lesson Paul compares the church to a building. He notes in order to construct this building, he, Paul, laid the foundation, now another is building on that foundation. The basic foundation,

however, is Christ Jesus, and that is all that matters — not individual personalities. It certainly is not worth tearing up a congregation over which of the builders is superior. In this context Paul writes, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.”

God’s temple in this passage is the Church. We as a body are the temple of the living God. And it is a terrible thing when the body of Christ is torn apart with dissension. Think about it for a moment. We as a church are the Temple of God. What does that say to you? It says three important things to me.

#### FIRST OF ALL, THE CHURCH IS A LIVING BODY.

“This is the church,” goes the little nursery rhyme, “This is the steeple; open the door and see all the people.” Wrong! The church IS the people! The church is not the steeple nor the stained glass windows nor the door. Stone, mortar and glass will never constitute the church. A building, no matter how beautiful, is simply where the church meets. The building is not the church. The church is a living, breathing, growing, influencing body infused with the Spirit of the living God. At least, that is what the church is supposed to be.

“I am building a church,” said a small boy playing with a set of blocks, “and we must be very quiet.” His father, eager to encourage this unexpected act of reverence, asked, “Why are we to be quiet in church?” “Because,” the boy replied, “the people are asleep.”

Heaven help us if that is how we perceive the church, or if that is the way others perceive us. The church of Jesus Christ must be the most alive, most dynamic, most awake institution on this planet.

A visitor to the Grand Canyon once stood speechless before the grandeur of that marvelous sight. Finally he recovered enough to exclaim, “I wish I had been here to see this happen.” The ranger standing nearby said, “You are!”

The ranger was saying that the Grand Canyon is still happening. That mighty gorge in the earth is still changing, still growing. So it is with Christ’s Church.

There is no institution on earth that authoritarian regimes around the world want to muzzle more than the Church. That’s true in China, it’s true in Russia, it’s particularly true in Moslem nations, it’s true wherever people are being oppressed. The Church is not a dead museum for displaying the relics of a bygone era. The Church is alive, and well, and making God’s voice known in human affairs.

When young St. Francis of Assisi knelt before the life-sized crucifix in the little tumbledown chapel of St. Damien, he heard God’s voice. “Renew my Church,” Francis heard God say. St. Francis was not sure what that summons meant. Taking it literally at first, he went to work restoring the badly decayed chapel itself — begging, buying, borrowing stones and timbers. He saw before long, though, that something far more costly was being asked of him. It was not the church building that needed renewing, but the interior life of church people, which is a much more difficult task.

That is our summons today as well. The Church is alive, but it is constantly, constantly in need of renewing. The Church is God's temple. It is the living body of Christ.

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH, THEN, ARE PARTNERS WITH CHRIST CARRYING ON GOD'S WORK.

We build on a foundation that others have laid. This is an important principle. Paul plants, Apollos waters.

Let's use an example. James Watt was the "inventor" of the steam engine. Right? Wrong. Peter Drucker, in one of his books, notes that Thomas Newcomen in 1712 built the first steam engine which actually performed useful work. It pumped water out of an English coal mine. Watt's steam engine was simply more refined — it was "state of the art" we would say today. The true inventor of the combustion engine, however, and with it what we call modern technology, was neither Watt nor Newcomen. It was the great Anglo-Irish chemist Robert Boyle, who did so in a "flash of genius."

Only, Boyle's engine did not work, and could not have worked, for Boyle used the explosion of gunpowder to drive the piston, and this so fouled the cylinder that it had to be taken apart and cleaned after each stroke. Boyle's idea, however, enabled first Denis Papin (who had been Boyle's assistant in building the gunpowder engine), then Newcomen, and finally Watt, to develop a working combustion engine. Boyle had the idea, and the others built on that foundation.

That is the nature of all knowledge. It is also the nature of the Church. We are Christ's assistants in building God's temple. He uses us — if we will let Him — to build something beautiful and lasting. None of us are to be prima donnas. None of us are stars. We are but co-builders.

Someone once said, "All the world's a stage — but nobody wants to be a stagehand." We are all stagehands; each of us has a role to play; none of us are stars.

Pitcher Lefty Gomez was a talented baseball player. When he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, a reporter walked up to him and asked, "Lefty, what was your secret?" Lefty smiled, his eyes began to sparkle, and he replied, "Two things. Clean living — and a fast infield."

Lefty was acknowledging that he alone wasn't responsible for all his victories. He had teammates, particularly in the infield, who were helping him.

George MacDonald once noted that one draft horse can move two tons of weight. But two draft horses, in harness working together, can move twenty-three tons of weight.

MacDonald put his finger on the strength of the Church. When we work together, we can perform miracles. Literally. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, "Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree

about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” We find that in Matthew 18:19. Not one person asking alone, but two or three agreeing, and then asking, and then working together. That’s how things are accomplished in the kingdom of God. That’s how things are to be accomplished around here.

ONE THING IS CLEAR FROM ST. PAUL’S WORDS. IT IS A SERIOUS MATTER WHEN SEEDS OF DISSENSION ARE SOWN IN A CONGREGATION. WE HAVE A WORLD TO SAVE. WE DON’T HAVE TIME FOR PETTY BICKERING.

Cotton Mather, that Puritan divine, once made a very astute observation about bees. He noticed that every swarm has its own unique scent, and when different swarms meet, the conflicting smells trigger a fight. However, Mather also noticed that when the bees are pollinating plants, they get covered with pollen nectar which masks the smell of the individual groups. When they all smell the same, there is no competition and their work gets done.

So it is in the Church. When we are all busy fulfilling our purpose of connecting people to one another and connecting people to God, we don’t have time, nor the inclination, to engage in petty bickering.

We are the temple of the living God. Each of us is a building block in that temple. Imagine what would happen to the temple if the blocks were in conflict with one another. Nothing would get done. This is serious business. It is so serious that St. Paul said, “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.” Members of Christ’s body are to work out their grievances among themselves then get back to the business of building Christ’s Kingdom. One last thing needs to be said, however.

THE FOUNDATION OF GOD’S TEMPLE IS CHRIST HIMSELF. THERE IS NO OTHER FOUNDATION.

For Christians the central episode in human history is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are inspired by His example and empowered by His presence in our lives. Our perspective on history is unique. We focus on the world outside, but we always view it from the foot of the cross. In everything we do we pray that we do it in the love and Spirit of Christ. He is the founder of the Church, but more than that, His Spirit is to infuse everything we do. He is the cornerstone of it all.

Most of us are familiar with the name Bill Lear. Lear is best known as the father of the Lear jet. Bill Lear made a childhood resolution to make enough money so that he could not be stopped from finishing anything. A tinkerer, inventor, and self-made millionaire, Lear made a fortune with the Learscope and other navigational aids for aviation. He later branched out into stereo systems and communications satellites. He was in his sixties when he launched the first Learjet, producing the ultimate personal aircraft at a price that most top executives could not resist.

At 65, Lear sold the business, but he did not like the lifestyle of being a Beverly Hills millionaire. So he established a laboratory in Reno, Nevada, where he worked on developing a better steam engine and

improving his jet aircraft. Lear kept working, even when he knew he was dying of leukemia. His last words to one of his colleagues were: “Finish it? You bet we’ll finish it.” Unfortunately, Bill Lear didn’t finish his work. He left that for his colleagues.

Jesus’ last words to His disciples were “Go make disciples...” In other words, “finish what I have begun.” And that is His command to us today. Finish what Christ started. Finish what Paul and Apollos added to. Finish what millions of saints through the ages, including many who are dear to us, have added to that.

Like the Grand Canyon, God’s temple is still happening — still growing — still changing — and we are part of it! “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” God’s temple! That’s who you and I are! So let’s get busy following in the footsteps of Christ and His saints, building God’s temple until it encompasses every person on earth!

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