

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

23 July 2006

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Ephesians 2:11-22

Do you ever think about your dream house? We've said more than once that our last house came much closer to it than the one we have now, in large part because it was 5 acres on a dead end dirt road. In the winter we could sometimes see our neighbor's lights, but not more than that; in the summer, we felt alone in the woods. More than once, my mother-in-law warned me that I was much too young to already have my dream kitchen. I knew she was right then, and I know it again now every time I stand on my head to try and get things out of the back corners of cabinets or struggle with where to put things. We had space, we had cabinets, and we had access to what we put in them! We didn't have a front porch and that would be one thing I would change, but we had a lot of wood in the house, a lot of light, a lot of land, and a great kitchen. And, if you can believe it, we even had a garage that had room for a car, a truck and a sailboat! Who could ask for anything more?

I suspect each of us has ideas and images, if not house plans and property; or if you're really lucky the actual dream spot to go home to at the end of every day. But what if we were to change the category and I asked about a dream house for God. Then what comes to mind? If we were going to build a dream house for God, what would it look like? What would it be made of? Where would it be placed? What direction would it face? How much room would it have and how would that space be used?

I have to wonder how far David had gotten in his plans for God's house. We're told about the finest and minutest details of the temple that Solomon finally built years later, but the text never tells us what David had in mind. Just that he told Nathan that he wanted to build a house for God. He had a cedar one for himself, after all. It only seemed right that he should now build one for God, let God come in out of the tent, get out of that Ark of the Covenant they'd carried God around in for all those years in the wilderness, and establish a house worthy of the one true God. To which Nathan said, by all means; God is with you, build God a house. David may have had some preliminary designs floating around in his head, but he probably hadn't gotten very far with the actual plans. It was the very night after his conversation with Nathan that God came to Nathan and put a hold on the whole permitting process, saying in effect, what makes you think I want to come inside? I've traveled around in the ark this long, maybe I like being out and about? Whatever else you think you know about me, don't be thinking that you're going to tie me down or domesticate me or get me established and settled in one place. That's not who I am or how I work in the world. I don't need a house of cedar. I don't intend to be contained inside walls or fences. I'll build a house for you, but you're not going to build a house for me. Not now. Maybe later, but not now.

The Hebrew word that is used in this part of the text has a whole host of meanings. The word can be translated as house, as palace, as temple, as dynasty. And that's where God made the switch. David was talking about cedar and gold; God was talking about offspring and family tree. David was talking about a place to settle down and rest after all that wandering and warfare, and God was promising David a political legacy that would last forever. David was talking about bricks and mortar and externals and extravagance, and God was talking about people and relationships and covenant and commitment.

It's striking to me how much energy we tend to put into our wood and windows, both at home and here at the church. And while I'd be the first to say that those things matter, especially on a rainy morning when we've planned to worship under the trees, basking in the gentle summer breeze, enjoying the birds' song, where would we be without a building to retreat into? But I also have to wonder when and how often the very same building that offers shelter and safety becomes more distraction and impediment than implement and instrument; and we all know it can. I doubt very much that I will ever live in a house that is so perfect that it looks like it could be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens*, or even worthy of being a stop on a holiday tour of houses, and that's fine with me. I don't want to live in a house where you can't live because you might make a mess or disturb the ambiance. But I also have to admit that some days it's easier to focus on the externals than the internals, on the state of the floor than the state of the relationships that live inside the walls of the house.

On most levels, the lesson from Ephesians is talking about something altogether different than the one from 2 Samuel, and yet I was struck to see language in that text about walls becoming dividing walls of hostility and a people being built together and a community becoming a dwelling place for God. I hear in both of these texts an emphasis on the notion of house or place as a space where life is found and nurtured, where God's presence is felt and known and embraced and becomes the fabric that knits everything else together. Those are the things God cares about most, and the place where God longs for us to put our attention and focus. Not that the external building doesn't matter, but that it's secondary to the ways in which we live together, the quality with which we care for one another, and the work that fills our days and our minds and our lives.

You may have seen an article recently in the Derry News that told the story of an exciting building project that's going on on the other side of the traffic circle – exciting, not because of the quality of building that it will produce, but because of the quality of relationship that it will foster and encourage. Etz Hayim is the Jewish congregation that was formed in Derry several years ago, and I think it's true that since their very beginning, they have found a space to gather and worship with the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration. As just about every new congregation does, Etz Hayim has dreamed of having their own space and their own home, one where they can have their symbols mounted all the time and not just when they gather, one where they can bring their children and pass on to them the lessons and legacy of their faith, a house that they can call their own. Several years ago they bought land on Bypass 28, they've developed plans, they've fundraised and moved toward construction. And they have gradually come to admit that it's not a piece of land that is going to work for them. In recent months, a different dream has been born and is coming to life, and that dream involves continuing to share a home with Church of the Transfiguration. The Episcopal church has 5 acres, and they have

agreed to sell a portion of that land to Etz Hayim. Each congregation will have their own building, but they will share parking and green space. Together they will create a sort of interfaith campus where each congregation can dwell and be at home, and where at the same time they can continue to journey with God and with each other.

All too often houses of worship have become dividing walls of hostility, but they can also provide places of shelter and welcome. Wood and windows, bricks and mortar can become places of distraction and compulsion, but they can also become implements of ministry and instruments of grace. What God cares about most are the ways in which we live together, with one another and with God; that our buildings and our bodies and our living rooms and our hearts become dwelling places for God, places of welcome and refuge, or cooperation and collaboration, of love and grace and safety and shelter.

Sing: Let us build a house where hands can reach Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known,
Here the outcast and the stranger Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.
(Marty Haugen, "All Are Welcome")