

25th Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, November 15, 2015
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Monuments — Build them in your Heart

When the Korean War memorial first opened, we had a guest visiting who had never been to DC. I give a pretty good night tour of the monuments, and even though it was winter, with few tourists, and drizzling, Sylvia, Melodies and I set off after dark to see the sights. I love the atmosphere of the monuments at night. They are well lit and stand in stark contrast to the dark sky. Drizzle makes the lights reflect and shine at night—it is a photographer's wonderland. We walked the Vietnam memorial in silence, climbed the Lincoln, took photos of the Washington and just enjoyed being in that space, almost entirely alone.

None of us had ever been to the new Korean Memorial but we followed the path and chatted a little on the way. This particular night there was a phenomenon where the fog lays on the ground about ankle deep. And it was interesting to see the turbulence of our feet moving and lifting the fog as we walked. It was a slow walk, and we were all just taking in the trees and breathing in the cool air, mesmerized by the moving carpet of the low-lying fog.

Without saying a word, all of a sudden all three of us stopped in our tracks, the hair stood up on the back of my neck as we realized we were surrounded. There in the midst of the memorial we stood in a swirling low fog, damp from the drizzle, and surrounded by larger-than-life soldiers, their rain capes slick and shining, frozen in time as they made their way slowly, carefully through the rice field. For a moment we were transported to a different time and place—the history and the spirit of the soldiers was alive.

If you visit monuments around the world, one thing becomes clear when you begin to walk around a place. Whether still in the form of structures, depicting scenes from history, or strewn about on the ground, the stones themselves, seem to be filled with the spirit of a place, or they lie empty and barren—reminders only of a time long past, laying lifeless. Other places, like the Korean memorial, emit an energy that seems to resonate from the very ground, alive with the past and living as a testament to life.

I have been lucky enough to visit many monuments around the world, and I can tell you that many ruins long past housing people and societies are still alive with the energy and presence of the past.

I had to ask myself at this point in the sermon, is it really the stones that resonate the history and spirit of the place, or is it a feeling that comes from within us? Is it what we know, value and experience that puts us in touch with a place?

Pompeii, Pearl Harbor, the list is long, but all of these places send shivers up your spine, as if the past is somehow juxtaposed on the place as we experience it in the present. A historic space has to be alive with personal meaning, but a spiritual place—in spiritual places, God must be present.

My friend Luis talks about people having an edifice complex. That is, every time there is a historic event or they have a spiritual experience, they want to hang onto the moment, so they build a building on the spot. But it's not the stones or the façade that makes the place holy, it is the experience that stays alive in the hearts of the people who visit the place. God must be in a church to instill in our hearts the deeper meaning of the event that sparked the building. And we need to carry that deeper meaning and calling with us, and we need to act in the world based on that calling.

Many places, and even many churches can become but empty shells, devoid of the spirit that inspired their construction. When that happens, when the meaning has been lost—when we become lost, it is better that a place be torn down than remain a shrine to great acts of the past—worshiped in its own right. I do not mean we need to level buildings, I mean we need to strip away what keeps us from being flexible and open to inspiration, renewal, and rebuilding of our hearts. There is nothing, there is no one who is so broken, that God cannot fix them.

When Jesus refers to tearing things down, it is not just a physical breakdown. I think He really means that there must be endings, in order to have new beginnings. We can have our structures on the outside, but we can tear down what is old and no longer serves us, and we can remodel if you will, a new creation that is alive with the spirit that dwells among us and calls us to mission and ministry.

The only constant is change.

Look around this place. We, Holy Cross, have built a structure. Not because something grand happened on this spot, but because something grand happened in our hearts.

The disciples in the Gospel today are wondering about the great and awesome buildings they are seeing, only to be told by Jesus that all of the stones will be scattered in ruins—a difficult concept to swallow considering what it took to build them. When pushed for more insight, Jesus replied that they need to beware, that no one comes and leads them astray. Stay true to yourselves I think was the message Jesus was giving. Stick to what you know in your heart, not what you see around you masquerading as greatness that would leave you awestruck by its grandeur. Funny, I am a member of Life Lock—the identity theft company, and in a recent ad they said, “How do we figure out who is authentic and how do we guard against fraud?” Literally a modern day Biblical question.

Hebrews today says, “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,”

This begs the question: What are God's laws? I feel like I need to be reminded— every day what the two greatest commandments are—the two most important things Jesus said we should remember, and upon which hang all the laws and the prophets.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love God. Love each other. This is the foundation of our faith. These are the words that are authentic, that can be trusted, and they are written on our hearts where they cannot be torn down.

There are different ways we can love each other. We can tell each other how we feel, and we can show each other how we feel. That is, through our words and through our actions in the world we love one another. In the words from Hebrews, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

What we build in this life is finite, what God builds in us, is infinite. We build sandcastles on the beach of God—they wash away, or snowmen that last but a few months before they melt away. If you are going to build a memorial, build it in your heart out of a foundation of love, trust, and faith. The church is NOT the building. The Church is the people and as long as we build a solid foundation in our hearts we will stand. When we get that feeling, when our emotions overflow when we are among the monuments and the stones that were hewn by our ancestors—it is not the stones and building foundations that make us feel the way we do. It is what is written in our hearts and minds, that sustains the spirit in a place—build on that in yourself. Take refuge in God who is in your heart, not in humans who try to recreate to satisfy their edifice complex.

Because, if we are so set in our ways, so set in our doctrines that we are unable to be flexible, grow, change and move in the creation that God made—a creation that is continually changing, growing and moving, then we and what we build shall also be torn down, washed away, or melted.

Anyone wondering what a good musical reference might be for a theme of understanding our finite existence and trusting in an infinite God? The Doobie Brothers, “What a Fool Believes,” came to mind, because, in our building the Church of God, in many ways, we are, “Trying hard to recreate what has yet to be created.” We anticipate. We do what makes sense to us, and we prepare and plan. But God is not finished with us yet. I think the best we can hope to do, is to trust in God, and try to stay open minded and flexible. Again, the only constant is change.

People plan, God laughs...you have likely heard this before, but it is particularly important, I think, in this season of Stewardship and the approaching season of Advent when we prepare the way of the Lord. Planning is a good thing, but planning specifically for an outcome we have a specific expectation of, often leaves us disappointed.

We are FINITE, but God is INFINITE. Wrap your mind around that for a moment.

Never ending—it is incomprehensible to us that a day to God may well be a thousand of our years—or a million. We can, even at our best, only conceive who we are, where we are supposed to be, and to do what we are supposed to do one day at a time. Our escape is setting our minds and imaginations on some better future place and time, but really what we have, all we have is now. If we focus on what we are doing in the now, on being the best people we can be right now, I think the future will take care of itself.

Our spiritual foundation, our pattern of doing, being, and giving, our disciplines and our habits if they are in sync, will prepare us to be flexible, regardless of what is to come.

Live into the wonder. Anxiety is not a sign of faith, so worry not about tomorrow, take that time you spend worrying and center yourself, be disciplined in your prayer, strive to be kind, just and caring, and love each other. These are the strongest building blocks we can assemble. This is how we will create for ourselves and the Christians who will come after us a community that will continue to thrive and sustain itself—because only a community that is founded on love, hospitality, tolerance, peace, and faith will survive.

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Amen.