

“Houses of God”
July 23, 2003

2 Samuel 7:1-7, 12-13
Mark 6:30-34, 54b-56

In the last 2 _ months, I’ve heard many of you say, in a variety of ways, that the more you *know*, the more you realize you *don’t* know. Since we’re here in church on a Sunday morning, I’m tempted to say, “Amen! Preach it brothers and sisters!” But, somehow, as I hear your voices in my head, as I hear you name that truth of human life, I am moved, instead, to say, “Ye-ah. Oh, ye-ah. . . . **So** much I don’t know, even when it seems as if I’m learning new things all the time!”

Getting up here, Sunday after Sunday, receiving the gift of your attention, and trying to offer some small piece of God’s healing truth – all this is *more* than enough to keep me aware of how much I do not know! All this is more than enough to make me say, on occasional – if not *frequent* – Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, “What *am* I doing?!!?? What do *I* know?!?” And yet, through God’s grace and perhaps through a dose of human foolhardiness, we keep coming together. We keep entering and continuing a conversation about who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do.

All this knowing and not knowing stuff got stirred up more than usual this last week, both as I read and prayed with this morning’s scripture passages and as I read and prayed about the violence, hate, and destruction that are raging in the Middle East. In those contexts, as in all of life, I know a little, and I don’t know a great deal.

In the context of the Middle East, there is much I do not know about what governmental, diplomatic, military, or humanitarian actions hold the greatest chance to build the foundation for a lasting peace in Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere. There is much I do not know about the roots of ferocious hate in the Middle East and the unwillingness even to acknowledge the humanity of the people who have become the “despised other.” There is much I do not know about how political leaders and demagogues distort the religious traditions and faiths of the Middle East – and of the United States – in their thirst for power and perverse glory.

But there are a few things that I *do* know. I know that many of us here this morning seek to be disciples or followers of Jesus, whether we understand him to be the Messiah – the Christ – or to be one of history’s great teachers of wisdom and compassion. And I know that what we have received from our spiritual ancestors, our grandmothers and grandfathers in faith, is that Jesus taught his followers to *love* their enemies. What we have received from those who have gone before us are the stories of Jesus’ repeatedly reaching *across* the 1st century equivalent of our national, ethnic, racial, and religious divides, reaching across them with the healing power of the love of God. What we have received is the story that, on the night he was betrayed and arrested, Jesus told his disciples to put away their swords, and then he healed the high priest’s slave who had been wounded by one of Jesus’ own disciples. And we have also received the story that, after he had been betrayed, abandoned, ridiculed, and then tortured and left to die, Jesus asked God to *forgive* his tormentors.

These are some of the things I know that I hold close in my heart as I try to envision peace in the midst of the carnage of war.

I also know that we in this congregation have been blessed with Congregation Shir Shalom. The relationship between First Congregational and Shir Shalom is a healing gift of grace, which God asks us to celebrate and nurture. It is a gift that we and the world need now more than ever. As national and international debate, public and private conversations, frequently and mistakenly equate the actions of the Israeli *government* with the content and commitments of the Jewish *faith*, I urge all of us in this congregation to recognize how much we don't know about Judaism. I urge us to recognize how much we don't know about whether our Jewish brothers and sisters believe Israeli actions are consistent with the dictates of Jewish faith and tradition.

If you are especially troubled, as I am, by the extent of the death and destruction in Lebanon, let us talk with the sisters and brothers with whom God has blessed us before we take an Old Testament verse here and an Old Testament verse there and conclude that the Jewish faith is driving the actions that trouble us so deeply. As a Christian, I do not believe that my own country's actions are consistent with Christianity in Iraq, in Guantanamo Bay, or in San Quentin. And so I urge us not presume that we know that Israel's actions are consistent with Judaism.

I am mindful this morning of knowing and not knowing for reasons beyond the current heartbreaking headlines. I'm also aware of knowing and not knowing because today's reading from the Second Book of Samuel points us toward the *centrality* of King David and the Jerusalem temple in Jewish history and identity. The roles of David and the temple in Jewish scripture and self-understanding are complex and fascinating ... and are largely *outside* our experience and understanding. And so, before I explore David and his desire to build God a "house" in Jerusalem from my non-Jewish perspective, I want to acknowledge the richness of Jewish tradition and to share my hope that all of us will be able to explore that richness with our sisters and brothers in Shir Shalom.

In our encounters with David in the Bible, I see a lot of you and me in him. This David is thoroughly human ... at times a faithful and humble servant of God and at other times a willful, ego-driven human being. Most often, as in this morning's reading, he is both, simultaneously. As the Second Book of Samuel describes this time in David's life, David is faithful in celebrating and giving thanks to God for all his good fortune, his military and political successes. He worships and praises his God, but then he decides it's *his* turn to be the giver and *God's* turn to be the receiver. David decides that he needs to build God a house, a permanent temple in Jerusalem.

David has his own agenda, but it's not God's agenda. Instead of waiting to hear God's voice, instead of seeking to discern God's movement in his life and the life of the people of Israel, David wants to forge ahead and build God a house, a house that David may hope will contain and tame God. But God was and remains uncontainable and untamable. David never gets to build that house.

And yet, David's son Solomon does build that house of God, the Jerusalem temple. It becomes a sacred space, a focus of religious life and worship. Over the subsequent centuries, the temple is destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. At different times, it served as a holy place of truth and community, but the gospel stories also tell us that it became a profane place of exclusion and greed.

As we consider our own sacred spaces, let's remember that the vulnerability of the Jerusalem temple to misuse and unfaithfulness is our vulnerability, too. Our house and houses of God can be places of rest, beauty, inspiration, and community, but because of our own limitations and fears, they can also become places of exclusion and

separation. They can become places where we lose sight that we are called to love and serve God through loving and serving God's wider creation.

Here at First Congregational, many church members are putting their time, energy, and creativity into maintaining and improving this particular physical house of God, as have so many people over the last 125 years. These folks, past and present, like so many people in this congregation, are generously sharing their talents in service to the church. This is something to be celebrated and given thanks for. I don't want to minimize that in any way. But through scripture, through God's voice in our own hearts, and through God's voice that comes from our sisters and brothers in Sonoma and around the world, calling out in pain and in need, we encounter what Jesus' first disciples encountered. We encounter God's deep, powerful love for us and for our immediate community, but we also discover that God's love includes an equally deep and powerful call to serve our sisters and brothers outside this church. The Holy Spirit seeks to bind up our wounds, fill us with hope, and bless us beyond our knowing. But we are given that healing, hope, and blessing, not solely so that we can gather with one another and celebrate those gifts. We are given that healing, hope, and blessing, so that we can share it beyond the literal and figurative walls of this house of God. I'm not saying that we don't *already* share those gifts. I'm simply reminding all of us, myself included, that we need always to listen for and then respond to God's call to share them.

A week and a half ago, the Thursday morning Faith Exploration group watched Bill Moyers' interview with writer Mary Gordon. In that interview, Gordon said that the most dangerous or damaging linguistic move we've ever made is to embrace either/or as the foundation of our understanding of the world and ourselves. I think she's right in general, and I think she's right especially in a context like this. The faithful, loving life does not require that we choose between either caring and nurturing one another within our immediate community or caring and nurturing for our sisters and brothers beyond it. The two are not in opposition; they are intimately intertwined. We are called to take what we learn and experience of God here and offer it in places and to people who are outside these walls. *And* we are called to bring what we learn and experience of God elsewhere and offer it to one another *within* these walls. Both/*and*, not either/*or*. This combined ministry can be a beautiful dance of mutual interdependence. It can be a beautiful tapestry of healing and love.

And now, allow me to return to that opening theme of knowing and not knowing. There is much I do not know about what we will be called to do as a congregation, within and outside the walls of this house of God. Much of our future remains shrouded in mystery, unseen and as yet unknown. But I *do* know that one of the greatest joys of ministry – both yours and mine – is to be participants in the unfolding of such a mystery. I also know that God calls us together and calls us to support, challenge, and love one another, within this particular house of God *and* within the whole house of God, within the whole of creation. May we have the courage, patience, and faith to answer God's call.

Amen.

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