

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
May 9, 2010
I Kings 8:22-30
Re-Dedicated to God

A long time ago, it says in the bible, the Lord gave King David rest from all his enemies. One day he looked around his luxurious palace of gold and cedar and was struck by the contrast between his house and the tent used to cover the sacred ark of the Lord. David wanted to build a temple for God, but was denied that request. The temple was finally built by David's son, Solomon – a building of gold and cedar that took seven years to complete. On its day of dedication, all the heads of the tribes of Israel were gathered as Solomon lifted his voice to heaven and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who keeps promises and shows steadfast love to us."

This was the scripture passage preached on by Dr. Hutchison on Mother's Day 75 years ago, when this church was dedicated to God in memory of two mothers, Sarah Jane Negley Mellon and Sarah Cordelia Smith King. It was, and is, a glorious building of marble and carved wood, of organ pipes and stained glass artistry. It was, and is, one of the most spectacular churches and edifices erected in Pittsburgh, being built around the same time as the Cathedral of Learning, which was finished two years later in 1937.

O that the members of the church and community leaders from then could be here today to see the building and all of you. I hope they would be pleased that the building they dedicated long ago is still active as a house of worship and place of ministry at the corner of Penn and Highland. Knowing now what it took to build this church, the question needs to be asked: If nothing were on this corner of East Liberty, would we build a cathedral to God here today? I'm not asking whether we could afford to build a cathedral like this or whether we could find the artisans, masons and woodworkers able to produce work of this quality. I'm asking, Would we have the commitment to build a church today to the glory of God, for prayer, evangelism, and hands-on ministry by God's people?

Our 2010 world is quite different from the 1935 world. Theirs was a modern world of machines and certainty; ours is a postmodern world of technology and skepticism. Theirs was a world of denominations – of cradle to grave Presbyterians; ours is a post-denominational world, where people come to our church with ties to Baptist, Catholic, and Methodist congregations or no congregations at all – and who choose us, not because we're Presbyterian, but because we offer something they seek, at least for the time being. Our world is postmodern, post-denominational, and in many ways, post-religious. Surveys show that people are much less comfortable identifying themselves with particular religious traditions, and instead will often summarize their faith practices by using the phrase "I'm spiritual, but not religious." But that begs the question: "Spiritual about what?"

And can spirituality alone compel anyone to build a church like this – ever?

I am a big fan of Kurt Vonnegut, who survived the bombing of Dresden in World War II, became a novelist and fiction writer, and who died about three years ago. With a wry smile, he once said, "True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country." He once said, "We could have saved the Earth but we were too darned cheap." And late in life, in a television interview, he said, "I have a message for future generations and it is this: Please accept our apologies." By his own admission, Vonnegut was not a religious man, but a humanist, who said this about life: "Here we are trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why." As poetic as his words are, if we really believed that, we would not build a church on an empty corner of Penn and Highland; we would not be here, literally here, today.

A friend of mine, Deborah Block from Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, recently reminded me about the source of the word "religion." Most scholars link it back to the Latin verb "religare," which means to tie or to bind fast. It is the same root that is used for the word "ligament," the tough tissue that holds our bones and bodies together.

For me, that word calls to mind the vision old Ezekiel had long ago. You remember when he stood before a valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37), a place where hope was lost completely. But those bones came together with a great, rattling noise. Suddenly there were sinews and ligaments on them; and then flesh and skin over the top. And God said, "I will bring you up from your graves. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live." Religion is that tying together of bones, of deep connections that allow our limbs to move, to work and walk about, to go forward by faith. Religion binds us together: binding us to our past – the witness of those who have gone before us, to the present, all those beside us, and to the future, the newly born and yet to be born children.

You can't move without ligaments. Tendons may attach your muscles to your bones, but ligaments hold the bones together so that you have elbows, ankles, and knees; so that you have the ability to walk, run, sit and stand. Spirituality is good in that it involves soul things, experiences of beauty, times of silence and meditation, feeling a oneness with all of creation. But to be spiritual, not religious, is to miss out on a vital part of faith. Religion is a thing of the heart and will. Religion is what binds us and unites us into congregations; it gives structure to our times of prayer, whether sung in praise or whispered at a funeral service for a loved one now departed. It causes us to step forward in a crowd and speak out for justice. It prompts us to raise our hand and object when language that is hurtful or abusive is spoken. It compels us to walk away from violence – to not trust in guns or weapons, ever. Religion is both the Old Testament understanding of living in complete obedience to God and the New Testament understanding of worshiping God through ritual, sacraments, and community life. It is the source of hope that pulls us up from a valley of dry bones. It is the source of inspiration that causes buildings like this to be erected. It is the source of commitment that sends us forth to be a witness in a hurting and broken world.

“Religare” means to tie or bind fast. What are you tied to? What holds you together? I’m not asking you today to commit to building a cathedral here at the corner of Penn and Highland. That’s already been done and as such it is not your explicit calling for such a time as this. I’m asking us, myself included, to respond once more to Solomon’s prayer. In dedicating the temple to God, Solomon knew that no place on earth could contain the God of heaven and earth. So Solomon prayed that God would keep God’s eyes on this place, and incline God’s ears toward the prayers spoken toward this place – seeing, hearing, heeding and forgiving. Solomon said his prayer with his hands raised to heaven and his voice loud enough to echo off the sky. But he wasn’t just talking to God. God had already done all those things. His God is the God of creation, the God of the Exodus, the Promised Land, the one who brought them safe thus far out of a covenant of love and a commitment to justice for all.

No, Solomon wasn’t so much asking for God’s dedication; he was asking for the people’s dedication – for our dedication. For God to look to a place with loving-kindness means there have to be places God can see – yes, individual hearts and homes, but also buildings and sanctuaries and houses of prayers. For God to incline God’s ears to heed our prayers means there have to be words spoken in prayer, songs sung in praise, times of vulnerability and confession and silence and petitions from the heart. Buildings are dedicated when cornerstones are set, ribbons are cut, plaques are installed, commemorative programs are printed. But we are buildings not made with stones, dedicated at baptism and with prayer, commissioned through times of confirmation and ordination. And we are re-dedicated every morning when we open our eyes; every Sunday when we enter these sanctuary doors; every time we step forward to share communion, to vote in elections, to live in community. All of that is possible because of the ligaments of our faith – religare, religion, that which binds us to God and one another.

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who keeps promises and shows steadfast love to us.” Solomon called upon God with those words; we do the same today. Whom do you know who needs to hear about the religion of this house? Whom do you know who needs to find a home, a prayer chapel, a conversation of faith within these walls? Whose bones needs these ligaments? And who will go forth to tell them? Dedication Sundays, whether the first or the seventy-fifth, are never the end of something. Rather they are about the beginning of something new – a re-dedication, a renewal of religious commitment, a time to say with the prophets of old, “Here I am, Lord; send me.”