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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
February 20, 2011
“Temple Talk”
I Corinthians 3:16-23

I want to start this morning with a hard, yet important, question: What is destructive in life? What diminishes and tears down life? One way to answer this question is to imagine that we're all patients in a doctor's waiting room—which may not be so far from the truth since everything I'm about to mention is true for someone in our congregation or extended congregational family. While waiting to be seen, the group shares what needs to be healed in their lives, starting with the physical maladies. Some say, “I have cancer, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, Alzheimer's.” We ask, “How are those things destructive?” One says, “Cancer cells grow out of control, forming tumors and metastasizing throughout the body until all normal functions cease.” Another says, “MS causes cells to attack the neurons and their protective sheaths until the nerve cells no longer function and the body stops working.” “AIDS devastates the body's autoimmune system so that anything from a cold to pneumonia can kill you.” “Alzheimer's is a progressive brain disorder causing memory loss and the eventual loss of basic motor skills like walking, communicating, and swallowing, thereby ending your life.”

Then the conversation gets more complicated. Some other people say, “I have arthritis which is genetic but was aggravated by the work I did for 30 years.” “I have heart problems like my parents, but I don't eat right and my blood pressure's too high.” “I have cirrhosis of the liver due to alcohol abuse.” “I'm addicted to heroin, daily putting myself at risk since any error in the amount I inject into my veins will shut down my heart and kill me.” Soon people begin to share more stories, about losing a child or losing a parent, about what they saw in wartime, when Dachau was liberated or soon after Hiroshima was destroyed. Some talk about dealing with depression, abuse, anxiety, or just plain feeling unsure about the meaning of it all.

There are degrees of destruction present in the waiting room of life – some relatively minor, some life-threatening. For many things we blame our bodies and the inevitability of growing old. For other things we blame ourselves and bad decisions we've made. With tragic things, we blame others; we blame bad luck; we blame God. So it goes.

Next, into this waiting room come a variety of people hoping to make things better: Physicians and nurses with answers for our physical woes. Physiotherapists for aching joints; psychotherapists for aching hearts. Some advise us on how to eat right, lower our cholesterol, and break our addictions. Pastors and pious friends invite us to pray, to think positively, to keep on keepin' on. A continuum of destructive realities is present in that waiting room; a similar continuum of constructive responses is also available – a whole range of responses to help us feel better.

And then in strolls the apostle Paul – Paul the preacher, Paul the ambassador of Christ. Officially, in today's passage, he was addressing the church in Corinth – that gathering of destructive personalities and wounded souls, a church split into factions over the

various apostles who had taught them the gospel of Christ. Yet, in a real way, he is addressing us, standing before us in our waiting room with our spiritual, physical, and emotional aches and pains. The first thing out of his mouth is this rhetorical question: “*Do you not know that you are God’s temple?*” The language sounds affirmational and positive. We repeat back “I am God’s temple” and mentally we promise to take our medicine, exercise more, floss, pray, go to church, and generally take better care of our temple from now on. First we saw the whole continuum of destructive things in life, laid out before us in a litany of horrors. So now we consider the continuum of constructive things in life – medicines, meditation, reducing salt, and reducing stress. And yes, the church stuff fits nicely into the range of therapeutic options: read a good book right next to read the “Good Book”; reconnect with friends as well as reconnecting with God. For all the bad stuff out there, there’s a long list of good stuff we should also be trying. At that moment, we resolve to take it upon ourselves to find the time to get our bodies and souls into better shape.

Unfortunately, Paul is not pleased with how we are interpreting his words. He immediately says something about not deceiving ourselves, and that only fools imagine that they are truly wise if all they know are things of this age. There’s a big difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. You can have knowledge about lots of things: medical terminology for treating cancer and AIDS, psychological phraseology for talk therapy and self-help programs, plus enough trivia knowledge to beat the computer Watson on Jeopardy! But that’s not what Paul is talking about.

When Paul said, “You are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you,” the “you” he is referring to is plural. You all – yinz – are the temple of God; collectively. God is not a private God. God is not one thing out of a long list of things, something to be compartmentalized and filed away in our private file cabinets. Faith is not something to be pulled out when the mood strikes us or attended to if we get around to it. Paul gestured at the entire waiting room and said, “You – Yinz – are God’s temple. Each plays a part. Each is precious and valuable. Let no one destroy it, for here is where God’s Spirit is made visible.”

Suddenly the room was not full of a laundry list of ailments, but made up of one, long, interwoven description of people’s needs and aspirations. The American “capital I” spirit of individualism was challenged by a biblical language that is communal and plural through and through. This language was there in the Beatitudes: “*Blessed are you all, yinz, who mourn, who are meek, who are merciful.*” This language was there in the New Testament: “*Can a foot say ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’? Can an ear say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’? No, the body is one and has many members, just as it is with Christ*” (I Cor 12: 12,14-16). This language is made real in the sacraments – being baptized into a community of faith that stretches back to Adam and Abraham and forward far into the future; and sharing communion as a public act of joint profession, standing beside young and old, gay, straight, black, white, rich, poor, in an act where worldly categories fall away and all that remains is a community of grace – a corporate, communal, living temple of God where God’s Spirit chooses to dwell.

And what binds this temple together? A wisdom that the world calls foolishness – the scandal of the cross. It is a faith that professes a crucified Christ, a rejected Christ, a Christ far from thrones and honor and earthly power, whose death and resurrection offer the ultimate answer to all that is destructive in this world.

Think back to our waiting room. It consisted of a laundry list of woes built around “I language”: I am well, I am not well. I have cancer; I have arthritis; I am an addict, an abuse-survivor, a widow, someone alone. Our knowledge helps us understand all those categories. Our knowledge also lines up responses, like books on a shelf, from which we can pick and choose our way to health: I am not well, but I am getting treatment for my cancer, taking vitamins for my arthritis; I’m going to a 12-step group for my addiction, to a counselor for my memories of abuse and rejection, to a quiet place to pray when I feel alone – and then I will be well. Yes, there is a place for this knowledge, and for these solutions to all that would hurt or destroy us in this life.

But Paul isn’t offering this knowledge. He is offering wisdom, a gospel wisdom. Paul pulls us from “I language” to “we-language”: We are blessed; we are saved by grace; we are redeemed; we are loved. He points to a cross and a crucified Savior. He points to an empty tomb and the resurrected Redeemer. Then he looks at us, and says, *“You all are God’s temple and God’s Spirit is with yinz. Let no one boast of human leaders, of categories from the waiting room of life, the hierarchies and divisions of life. There is no need for such things, for all things are yours. Whoever taught you knowledge – whoever shared with you about faith – whoever diagnosed your ills or prescribed therapies for your healing – whatever your past story, your present reality, your future dreams – this is more critical: All belongs to you and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.”*

Some call this foolishness: God in Christ – Christ on a cross – Christ in you, in us, in the institutional church, in the hearts of Pittsburghers and Pennsylvanians and Filipinos and foreigners the world over. But to appreciate this foolishness, this true wisdom, requires only one simple step forward – away from “I language” into “we language,” the plural “temple talk” of the apostle Paul. For he has said directly to us, as a group: *You are God’s temple – the strength of the building of the Lord is directly related to your strength together, your common life, your combination of eyes, ears, feet and hands; your combination of young, old, healthy and infirm; your combination of citizen and immigrant, American, Egyptian and more. Behold, the Lord is building a new thing; do you not see it?*

Is this too hard to accept? Long ago, Jesus asked the same thing of his followers, saying to them: “Are my words too hard? Do you wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:67-68) Notice the plural – “to whom can we go?” Together may we too be a temple, a community who, by grace, trust the words of eternal life.

AMEN