

**July 26, 2020 | Journey worship**

**TEXT: [1 Corinthians 3:10-19a](#)**

**TITLE: Temple Work**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I want you to imagine something from our pre-coronavirus lives—something that we've all experienced. I want you to picture being a patient sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Imagine that this room contains a diverse group of people suffering from a wide range of ailments. Now imagine that people are willing to name what ails them. Some may say, *I have cancer cells making tumors in my lungs. I have multiple sclerosis that attacks my nerves and is breaking down my body. I have AIDS that weakens my autoimmune system, or I have Alzheimer's that harms my brain and takes away my memory.*

But not all diseases are just physical ailments. Some people might say, *I have chronic arthritis, but it was aggravated by the type of work I did for 30 years. Or I have heart problems which run in my family, but my diet and blood pressure have made it worse. I have an alcohol addiction that is destroying my liver.* Some physical issues are also linked to emotional traumas, when people name the daily stress of living in poverty, the lingering grief from losing a child, or what they endured during a time of war. They name depression, scars from being abused, or simply feeling unsure whether life is trustworthy and worth living at all.

Now picture folks coming into this waiting room whose purpose it is to make people feel better. Who might they be? It could be nurses and aides who measure blood sugar levels and review prescriptions. It could be physical therapists who help repair aching joints or surgeons who remove tumors and open clogged arteries. It could be dieticians or counselors; it could be friends and family members who remind the patients that they're not alone.

There's our waiting room: a closed system made up of patients needing care and caregivers working to make things better. That is often how we think of life. There are people in need and there are people who help those in need. But is that truly all there is in this waiting room of life? What about those things that are more than what appear on a doctor's medical notes or in a caseworker's file? What about faith? What about our spiritual lives, our relationship with a God who created us and a Savior who loves us?

In 1 Corinthians 3, the apostle Paul talks about different types of building materials: straw, wood, stones, silver and gold. Think of this list as an analogy of the approaches offered by the caregivers who enter into our imaginary waiting room. Some are modest efforts moving us to health—the sticks and straw of blood work and range of motion exercises. Some are more elaborate—the gold and silver of transplants, joint replacements, and powerful antibiotics. Not every caregiver available is the best, nor is every treatment successful. Sadly in our society, not everyone has access to or can afford the “gold plans” of premium health care. As our recent Facing Systemic Racism seminars pointed out, sadly these disparities in care can often be traced back to biases related to race, gender, and sexual identity. Paul wisely reminds us that all our works will be tested. Those that truly nurture life and health for all will survive trials by fire;

those things that don't address the real needs or are based upon unjust or biased beliefs will over time be reduced to ashes.

But then Paul says something critical to everyone in the waiting room—to the patients and the caregivers alike. Paul boldly announces *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”* This is a whole different conversation from the typical ones in our waiting room. This is about something much deeper than just identifying your current level of pain or taking a prescription to the local CVS. Paul says *“You are God’s temple.”* This is a metaphor of substance. We are to see ourselves as a temple. Whether we are 4 feet tall or 7 feet tall, we have substance, stature, a presence in the world. Whether we weigh 110 pounds or...more than 110 pounds, we have beauty, grace, a value simply by being who we are. Whatever our age, our ability, our race, zip code, language or identity, we are God’s temple. That wasn’t part of the language earlier spoken in the waiting room. Before the focus was on the various parts of who we are: How are our joints and organs doing? How is our brain and can we still drive our cars around? But once Paul steps into the room, now the language is about us in our entirety and our place in this world. *We are God’s temple—with God’s Spirit dwelling within us.*

Kevin Seybold is a professor of psychology at Grove City College and a member of ELPC. His most recent book is called Questions in the Psychology of Religion. He talks in one chapter about how the language of faith, especially the language about eternal life, changes how we understand life now. Many folks sit in the waiting room and catalogue their aches and pains. We think of ourselves as mostly flesh and blood, even though we do admit to having a mind, consciousness, and a soul or spirit that is part of our make-up. Too often we treat the spiritual stuff as less important than the physical stuff. Prayer and faith are treated like straw and wood, while organ transplants and ICU care are the silver and gold standards. Yet Kevin would remind us of the same things Paul insists upon. Paul calls us a temple and then goes a step further. He professes that the foundation upon which that temple stands is none other than Jesus Christ. Christian faith—an openness and trust in God’s loving grace revealed in Christ—is the foundation upon which all else stands. In Kevin’s book, he reminds us that eternal life—however you picture it—is fundamentally a gift. It is not part of our intrinsic nature. It is not an automatic next chapter in the saga of our earthly life, somehow guaranteed in the genetic structure of our flesh, blood and organs. Eternal life is something that requires God. It is something miraculous. It is something given to us—not something we stumble onto when life ends or earn by merits we accumulated in life’s waiting room.

That’s why it is so important to hear Paul’s voice—and to hear it spoken both to us as individuals and as a community. Paul says, *“You are God’s temple”* and the *“you”* he uses is both specific and general—you and you and you, as well as you, yunz, together. Each of us plays a part in this drama. Each of us is precious, artisans building upon a foundation whose work will be tested by fire and evaluated by the passage of the years. This type of temple work requires a lot more than just knowledge. It requires more than just a physician’s skill, a nurse’s compassion, or a therapist’s patience. It requires more than book-learning and charts of statistics. It requires not so much knowledge as it requires wisdom—gospel wisdom.

After Paul calls us temples, he goes on to say this: *Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.* Paul didn't say these things to make us feel discouraged—that God's truth is beyond us. No, just the opposite. Paul tells us to shake off our dependence on how things are, the contractual, literal nature of life that leads to division and distrust, racism and fear—and to put on the nature of Christ that some may deride as foolish, but which is wise beyond all we can think or imagine. The British theologian Rowan Williams put it this way: *Jesus did not come to be a competitor for space in the world. In his life, death, and resurrection the human map is being redrawn, the world turned upside down, and all rivalry and defensiveness is called into question.*<sup>i</sup>

We remember this week the life and witness of Civil Rights leader John Lewis. He accomplished much in his years of public service. Some of the images that come to mind are when he and the other activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sat silently at the segregated lunch counters in Nashville facing horrendous abuse; or in 1965 when he led 600 peaceful protesters across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, only to be beaten and left for dead for his audacious witness. The call for justice John Lewis, C.T. Vivian and others offered was not just another voice in the waiting room. It was a proclamation of something new—a world beyond the thrall of racism, a beloved community shaped by the gospel of a crucified, risen Christ. In March of this year, Lewis returned to Pettus bridge and he offered these words of challenge that are still valid for us today: “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”

Into the waiting room of life, people of faith enter and offer a different perspective. During this difficult Covid-19 season, Paul wants us to look around the room with eyes of love and say “*You all are God's temple. Your strength comes from the foundation we share in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We walk forward by faith, not by sight, trusting in the One who makes all things new—for this life and for the gift of the life to come. So go, get into good trouble—necessary trouble. God's Spirit dwells within you, so go—heal—work—and redeem the soul of America.*”

AMEN

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<sup>i</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Roger Gench essay, “Pastoral Perspective – I Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16); Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, p. 330; quoting Rowan Williams *Christ on Trial*, 2000, pp. 6,52,69..