

2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The Homiletical Question: What does the Holy Spirit want the People of God to understand from these readings on this occasion?

Sometimes the architectural design used in religion can reveal a great deal about a relationship with God perceived from within the context of a particular historical era. Take, for example, the design of the Second Temple in Jerusalem before its destruction by the Roman army in 70 C.E. How close, how intimate, do you think the human person could get to the Divine Presence if you lived at that time? A close look at the design of the Temple reveals the following structure and the perceived relationship with God that comes with it.

Climbing the Temple Mount and entering through one of the gates, the first thing you would encounter is the Court of the Gentiles. This is as far as a non-Jew could come. Then comes the Women's Court, followed by the Court of the Israelite Men. You can already begin to see the stratifications and presumed limitations on intimacy reflected in architectural design. Next would come the Court of the Priests where only members of the Levitical priesthood could enter. Then you would see the Temple proper which enclosed the Holy Place, and then the Holy of Holies where the Divine Presence resides. Members of the priestly class could enter the sanctuary immediately outside the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifices and incense, but only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year, to offer sacrifice both for his sins and for the sins of the people (Hebrews 9:6-7). What does all this say about the nature of one's relationship with God? Now I don't mean this to be a sermon on liturgical architecture, but I hope you can see how our perceptions of a relationship with God can affect and be reflected in the environment for worship.

The unknown writer of Ephesians, usually presumed to be Paul, uses the imagery of the worship space to make a point when he says that Christ *"has broken down the dividing wall... between us. He abolished the Law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two."* Then using the language of civic life he goes on to say, *"you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling*

place for God.” We need to pay particular attention to these last words: “You also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

This statement is nothing short of astounding. This is at the heart of the gospel message: God dwells within you! There are no barriers; there are no dividing walls, no partitioning, and no stratification. In Christ we are one with God and with one another. How sad it is that we don't see this, trust in this, and live this good news!

Two weeks ago I sat with one of the hospice patients I visit. She is 87 years old and has lost everyone dear to her except her daughter. She sorely misses her family and feels very much alone in the world as she copes with life in a nursing facility. At one point she turned to me, her eyes brimming with tears, and asked, “Do you think God still cares about me and loves me?” I told her that of all the things I am sure of, that is the one thing of which I am most certain. Tears running down her cheeks, she smiled a big smile and said, “I needed to hear that. You've made my day.” Sad to say, we all need such assurance and we need it often.

God loves you! More than that, God loves you enough to dwell within you... and you abide in God! Regardless of what you suffer, you are never alone. Nothing you can do will change that. But day to day living on a superficial plane blinds us to this Divine Presence, and we develop a kind of spiritual amnesia.

To make this point to the young novices entrusted to his care as Novice Master, Thomas Merton liked to use the following image in their formation. Suppose you inherited a large elaborately furnished mansion, but for some reason you had lost the key. So instead you have taken to living in a tent out in the back yard behind the garage. Now you're very proud of the mansion you inherited and you want to show it off. So you invite others over to see it. And after a cookout you say, “Wouldn't you like to see the beautiful mansion I have inherited?” So looking through the leaded windows you show them the great hall. You show them the library and the music room. From the garage you pull out a ladder and say, “Would you like to see the upstairs bedrooms?” Your visitors are amazed and rightly awestruck at what they see. Now what if you actually have been living in the mansion all along, but through a massive delusion due to your amnesia, you think you are living in a tent out behind the garage? Sadly, this is how we approach our relationship with God.

In wisdom garnered from a lifetime of contemplative practice, Father Thomas Keating, the late Trappist monk known personally to many of us, put it this way: *“The chief thing that separates us from God is the thought that we are separated from Him.... We fail to believe that we are always with God, and that God is part of every reality. The present moment, every object we see, our inmost nature, are all rooted in God. But we hesitate to believe this until personal*

experience gives us the confidence to believe in it. This involves the gradual development of intimacy with God [through heartfelt prayer]... The interior experience of God's presence activates our capacity to perceive God in everything else—in people, in events, in nature.” (Open Mind, Open Heart, p. 44).

A deep spiritual hunger exists in our world today. We can feel it within us. If today we feel as if we are “like sheep without a shepherd,” could it be that we have grown blind to this gift of Divine Presence that is always ours? To experience it in our lives once again, we need to give God only two things and two things alone: time and attention. If you seek God in the heartfelt silence of your longing, God will meet you there.

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