

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Kings 8:22-30 "Blessed By The Church"

The Temple was the focus of Israel's faith for a thousand years. When Solomon prayed at its dedication, he asked if God could really "dwell on earth," still less in a man-made temple. But knowing that the "shekinah-glory" - the bright cloud that signified God's presence - had already filled the Holy of Holies, Solomon prayed with vigor that this temple would be the place where God heard his people's prayers.

"Oh Lord, when your people Israel have been defeated because they have sinned, and turn back to you and confess, praying to you in this temple; then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people and bring them back to the land you gave to their fathers...". "When they pray towards this temple in times of defeat or drought or famine or plague or exile, hear from heaven and forgive and restore your people." (1 Ki 8). So Israel prayed in and towards the temple, being sure that this was the route to God's presence.

But then the Temple was destroyed, burned, turned into a pile of rubble. The people were exiled to Babylon. After 70 years a handful returned, and started rebuilding the city and the temple. It never came to much; and for 400 years Israel never really ended its exile - ruled over by Egyptians and Syrians and Greeks and Romans. And then the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Where was God now, when Israel needed him most?

Against that background, Jesus arrived to say that his body was a new temple - this was where you could meet God. And in the next generation, Paul the Apostle challenged the new community of Christians: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor 3). The new focus of Christian faith was to be the Christian community, the new temple in which God dwelt on earth.

We call that community the *Church* - the gathered people of God. And that is why of all the things I am thankful for, the church is very high on the list. The church is the community where I experience the presence of the Spirit of God. It is the place and the people where my prayers are focused and answered. It is the community through which God sustains me - by the prayers of other people (thank you, those of you who pray for your pastor and his family!); by the love and support and friendship I find here; by the encouragement I receive when other people show me the Spirit at work within them. The church is the focus of my spiritual life. And I know that is true for many of you too: that you also are thankful for your church, and for all that it means in your life.

One frequent command to the churches in the New Testament letters is that they should conduct themselves in a way that is worthy of their calling in Christ, and be an example to outsiders. Looked at from the outside, that

means communities ought to be glad that the churches are there among them. I have been in too many churches that had so little interest in their surrounding community, or were only known for what they were against, that much of the community would have been glad to see those churches move elsewhere! The community should be glad for the example and the influence a church brings to the area.

I was reminded in the past couple of weeks how that can work. We received a letter from the leaders of a Cub Scout troop that uses our space regularly. *"You have demonstrated community support... you have allowed us to hold Pack events... you have always come through for us and never let us down... We try to repay your kindness by collecting food for your food pantry every year before Thanksgiving. If there is anything else the Scouts can do to help you, please let us know..."* That's a reason for thanksgiving!

After surgery and recovery, a member of our church wrote a letter to the congregation to be included in the bulletin and the newsletter; *"It's hard to express my gratitude to such a wonderful congregation for all your prayers and concern... the cards, the rides, food, flowers, visits, phone calls... of the many blessings that the Lord has given, one of my biggest blessings is being part of the Wading River Congregational Church."*

Last week I was reading through some of your responses to our survey. It would be easy, of course, to focus on the criticisms and the suggestions for change; but what strikes me more is the overall tone: "we love our church family... the church is a blessing in my life... the atmosphere is warm and wonderful... the Sunday School is excellent... this is a most wonderful church... I am a very happy member... I am blessed and love it here... we love the church." Many people grasp and are thankful that this church is the

focus of their Christian lives; this is where they are loved, taught, prayed for, strengthened, supported, encouraged; this is where they come to offer up their hearts in grateful worship to God their Father and Jesus Christ their Savior.

I am deeply thankful for this church – for all of you! In all the churches I have been part of in the past 40 years, none has been as warm, as welcoming, as united, as harmonious, as hard-working as this congregation. I am blessed to be part of this church. On Thanksgiving Eve, I just wanted to say "thank you," to all of you.

Let us pray...