

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 28, Series B  
Saturday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Sunday, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**Sermon:** “What Wonderful Stones!”

**Text:** Mark 13:1-2<sup>1</sup>

**Focus:** We are God’s Temple now.

**Function:** That they would see the Church as a living, growing entity—not just a building.

**Structure:** Story-Applied

**Locus:** “That I may be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom...” (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (Mark 13:1, ESV).<sup>2</sup> That’s what the disciples exclaimed as they walked out of the Temple complex where Jesus had been teaching. They were awed and overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the place and could not contain their excitement. The Temple at which they marveled was the so-called “Herod’s Temple,” which was really a huge remodel and renovation project on the second Temple constructed by Zerubbabel after the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon after the Edict of Cyrus the Persian. (*Aside:* If you have no idea what I’m talking about, come to Bible class! We’re currently studying the Book of Ezra, which describes the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem!)

According to ancient sources, “Herod’s” Temple was a veritable wonder of the world. People journeyed from far lands just to see it, even though only Jews were allowed inside.

Josephus describes the sight:

“Now the outward face of the Temple... was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a fiery splendor, and made those

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first part of the longer Gospel pericope from Mark 13:1-13.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

who forced themselves to look upon it to turn away their eyes, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for, as to those parts of it which were not gilt, they were exceeding white... Of its stones, some were forty-five cubits in length, five in height and six in breadth.”<sup>3</sup>

The foundation stones were even larger: forty feet long by twelve feet high by eighteen feet wide.

This tremendous building astounded the disciples. “What wonderful stones!” they declared, “and what wonderful buildings!”

But Jesus was not impressed. “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). Thus, Jesus predicted the Temple's doom some forty years before the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D. During the Jewish War, the Roman general Titus laid siege to the city in order to suppress a Jewish revolt. As punishment for the uprising, the Romans razed the Temple to the ground, leaving only some of the foundation stones, which today comprise the so-called Western Wailing Wall, where pious Jews weep for their lost prize. Even the stones that remain have been eroded by generations of Jewish families' tears.

The Jews took inordinate pride in the Temple. They had an almost superstitious belief that as long as they carried out the sacrifices and Temple rituals, God would never let them be destroyed. But their fetishistic faith turned the Temple into an idol. Instead of the house of God, it replaced God in their hearts. The Jewish priests even justified killing Jesus by claiming that if they didn't stop him, the Romans would take away their privileged position (John 11:48)—and what would that mean for the Temple?! But Jesus' death on the cross was the final sacrifice, and his prophecy proved true.

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus, as quoted by William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 308.

I guess what you may be thinking: “All of this is very interesting history, Pastor, but we’re not Jews, and we don’t live in Jerusalem, so what does this have to do with us?” Quite a bit, in fact! For if you imagine that just because we are Christians, we do not turn our houses of worship into idols that distract us from Christ and detract from true worship, then you are seriously mistaken.

Sometimes congregations build large, ostentatious church buildings because they suffer from what I call *Field of Dreams* theology. *Field of Dreams* was a baseball movie starring Kevin Costner as an Iowa farmer who heard voices whispering, “If you build it, he will come.” So he built a baseball diamond in the middle of his corn field, wondering who would show up. This *Field of Dreams* theology shows up when we build a new church building, hoping that “if we build it, they will come.” A great example of this was Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. But they’re not the only ones!

But big, beautiful buildings aren’t what draw people to Church. People come to church because a friend invites them to come, or somebody shares the Gospel with them. People come to church because the Holy Spirit draws them. Europe is full of beautiful basilicas and towering Gothic cathedrals. But most of them stand empty. Most of them are become museums and not real houses of worship anymore. Why? Because the church is not a building. God’s people are the Church.

I remember a little poem I learned as a child in Sunday school. It even had actions with it. “Here is the Church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors, and see all the people!” But notice that this poem assumes that the Church is the building. It’s wonderful when we have a building where we can worship God outside of the weather and elements. But you don’t need a building to have a Church. Many Church plants in America rent space in school cafeterias or meet in

people's basements or even city parks. In East Africa, where the fastest-growing Lutheran churches in the world worship in Ethiopia and Madagascar, most congregations are too large to have a building so they just meet outside under a tree and people take turns standing in the shade or sitting in the sun.

Nevertheless, I remember a sad story about a dying church in the Denver metro area. After more than 80 years in existence, they were down to about only 20 people in worship on a weekend. And yet they were afraid to reach out to their neighborhood with the Gospel. "There are some real weirdos out there!" they declared. Another, larger congregation offered to merge with them and help them relaunch and rebirth as something new. But the dying church's leadership balked and said, "You're just trying to take our building!" Now they are close to closing their doors because they forgot that the Church isn't a building; it's a *people*.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus tried to keep people from getting hung up by a building. He told the woman by the well that it didn't matter where people worship God (John 4:21). "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (John 4:23). Jesus even told the Jewish religious leaders, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19).

Given what we said about the Temple earlier, you can imagine how much this might infuriate them. "It has taken forty-six *years* to build this Temple," they said, "and you will raise it up in three days?" (John 2:20). Jesus must have seemed to be either a blasphemer or a madman.

"But," John tells us, "he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:21).

Because the Son of God came down from heaven and became a human being, the place where God's glory dwells shifted from a building to a body: Jesus' flesh and blood. That temple was torn down when Jesus died for our sins on the cross. But three days later, he restored the Temple when he rose from the dead.

But after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Temple moved again. Now, the New Testament writers insist, *you* are the Lord's Temple. Christ lives *in you*, if you believe in him and receive him by faith. The Holy Spirit lives *in you*! "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The Temple moved from a building to a body to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Because the Church isn't a building. The Church is God's people. Dear brothers and sisters, *you* are God's people. Together *we* are God's Church.

Sometimes visitors say to me, "Pastor, you really have a beautiful church here."

To which I usually reply, "Yes, thank you! The people are wonderful, aren't they!"

The building isn't the Church. The people are the Church.

And that is why we gather for worship as the Body of Christ. We don't come here to Epiphany so that we can marvel at the architecture, or the skillful carpentry, or the beautiful banners. As wonderful as our chancel furnishings are—the pulpit and the altar and the Communion rail—we don't come to admire those things. Nor should we chase people away from our church by charging them exorbitant amounts of money to rent or use our building. After all, what is more important: stewardship of a building or stewardship of the Gospel? What is God more interested in: a pristine building or a people who love Jesus and love their community? I think that if Jesus were walking around here today, he would be much more

pleased to see a building with chipping paint and dented drywall than an empty cathedral—as long as it were full of lots of people of different generations, races and ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and gifts.

In Matthew 16 Jesus promises that he will build his Church (Matt. 16:18). He was talking about a people, not a building. The Apostles call us “living stones being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5), “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Dear brothers and sisters, we are living stones being built up into Christ’s Church. And Jesus isn’t done building his Church. He wants more stones, and he wants our help to gather them. So let’s open our hearts and arms to welcome and invite and *go* to our family and friends, strangers and neighbors, so they too can become living stones in Jesus’ Church. The Church is not a building. We are God’s Church. Look around you and behold! What wonderful stones! In the name of Jesus. Amen.