

Bigger

1 Kings 8:22-43

May 29, 2016

(Combined service with Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church)

Bigger. God is bigger.

The men and women of this church -- you, the men and women of Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, “the church of love, hope, and new beginnings” -- you have gathered in Waterloo, Iowa, for twenty-five years, worshiping God, training up your children, proclaiming and doing the gospel, caring for each other, and reaching out into this community to help those who are lonely or hurting or broken or lost.

What you are doing matters. What you are building here matters. It is important. It is big. But God is bigger.

The men and women of our church -- we, the men and women of First Congregational United Church of Christ, the church that declares that “God is still speaking” -- we have gathered in Waterloo, Iowa, for one hundred and sixty years, worshiping God, training up our children, proclaiming and doing the gospel, caring for each other, and reaching out into this community to help those who are lonely or hurting or broken or lost.

What we are doing matters. What we are building here matters. It is important. It is big. But God is bigger.

God is bigger! God is bigger than you. God is bigger than me. God is bigger than Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church. God is bigger than First Congregational United Church of Christ. God is bigger than the National Baptist Convention. God is bigger than the United Church of Christ.

God is bigger than any of us. God is bigger than all of us. God is bigger than any and all of our churches. None of us have God figured out. None of us know the whole story of what God wants or where God is going. None of our churches can “contain” God. None of our churches have the last word. Which means we have to listen. Which means we have to pay attention. Which means we have to be ready to learn something new. Which means we have to be humble. Which means we need each other. Which means we need God.

Solomon understood that.

Solomon was David’s son, the third and, sadly, the last king of the united kingdom of Israel. God rescued the Hebrew people from Egypt, bringing them out of the land of slavery and into the land of promise under the leadership of Moses and Aaron and Miriam and Joshua. The people settled the land, living and working and defending themselves in their tribal groups, twelve separate family clans. Life was difficult and dangerous and lawless, the tribes constantly threatened by or at war with hostile neighbors or even each other.

Saul, made Israel's first king by Samuel, was the first to bring the tribes together and to get them to work and fight together for a common cause. But it was David who put Israel on the map, David who made Israel a kingdom, a nation, David who brought peace to the land and peace to the people. Or, we should say, it was the Lord who brought peace to the land and to the people by means of David's courage and faithfulness and trust in God!

David was Israel's iconic king, which is why in times of suffering and terror, the people yearned for a new king like David, a son of David, a messiah. David won the peace, but David did not fulfill his dream of building a house of God in Jerusalem.

It was Solomon, David's son and successor, who built the Temple. It took seven years and tens of thousands of laborers and great expense to build the Temple. It was a magnificent edifice, built of cedar and pine and olive wood, with furnishings of stone and bronze and pure gold. It was a place worthy of a king, a place, as Solomon hoped, worthy of the king. So when the time came for the ceremony of dedication for the completed Temple, it was not the high priest who prayed, but the king himself.

Solomon, the king of Israel, took it upon himself to mark this momentous occasion. They had been in the land almost five hundred years, but only now was God getting a permanent home among them. God was getting a home, a house, a Temple, in the midst of the people, but Solomon understood. Solomon understood that God wouldn't live there.

So when Solomon faced the altar and raised his arms and prayed, he said: "Can you, O God, really live on earth? Not even all of heaven is large enough to hold you, so how can this Temple that I have built be large enough?"

Solomon understood that building a Temple, a home for God, is a risk. Because we might think that since this is God's house that God is here and not there. Because we might think that we must come to this house to find God. Because we might think that we can contain God in this house. Because we might think that God belongs to us.

Building a church is a risk, too. Because we might think that God is here and not there. Because we might think that we must come to this house to find God. Because we might think that we can contain God in this house. Because we might think that God belongs to us.

But God is bigger! God won't fit inside our churches or inside Solomon's Temple. It really is Solomon's Temple, isn't it, not God's? And these really are our churches, aren't they, not God's? These are not God's houses, but ours, but we are blessed, as Israel was blessed, if when we gather to worship and to offer God our praise and to ask God for what we need, God meets us here and God listens to us here.

That's what Solomon wanted. That's what Solomon prayed for. Solomon wanted God to listen, to listen to his prayer and to the prayers of the people when they come to the Temple to pray.

Solomon wanted God to hear their prayers for justice, to vindicate the innocent and punish the guilty. Solomon wanted God to hear their prayers for mercy, because Solomon understood that human beings, even God's own people, are frail and weak inconstant. We will sin and we will suffer for our sinfulness and we will need God's forgiveness and God's mercy and God's grace.

Solomon wanted God to meet them here in the Temple, to listen to them here in the Temple, to listen to his prayers and to the prayers of the people of Israel, but not only to his prayers and not only to the prayers of the people of Israel, but to the prayers of foreigners, too! Solomon prayed: "When a foreigner who lives in a distant land hears of your fame and of the great things you have done and comes to worship you and to pray at this Temple, listen to his prayer." Because Solomon understood. Solomon understood that God is bigger than the Temple and bigger than Israel. Solomon understood that God doesn't belong to them.

God doesn't belong to us. We belong to God. God is bigger than our churches, bigger than our traditions, bigger than our styles of worship or statements of belief or ways of practicing our faith. We all have our own ways of doing things, of praying and singing and honoring God and serving God, and that's OK. God is pleased when we offer the best of what we have and the best of what we are. But there is always more to learn, always more to know, always more to see and taste and feel of who God is and what God wants. God is still speaking and God is still doing and God is still so much bigger than any of us can know or imagine.

This last spring, during the season of Lent, we used a series of images of Christ entitled, "The Christ We Share," as the focus for our worship and sermons. The images came from many different people and cultures: Korean and Balinese, Brazilian and Cameroon, Salvadoran and Filipino and Masai, all seeing Jesus through different eyes and experiences. From each, we learned something new about Jesus and our own knowledge and experience of Jesus grew broader and deeper and richer ... and bigger.



One of my favorite images, the one we used on Easter Sunday, is shown on the front of your bulletin. This image, entitled "Golgotha," was painted in 1963 by Gebre Kristos Desta, an Ethiopian painter and poet and teacher.

You see Jesus. You know it's Jesus, even without the title, arms outstretched, being crucified. You see him, this crucified human figure, hanging suspended against a dark background. The background is stark and dark and angular. It's the world, not the world God made, but the world we make, the world that kills Jesus, the world that kills us, the world Jesus died to save.

Jesus hangs there, clearly a human figure, but with no face, no distinguishing features, no skin, no skin color. He is just red, all red, all blood red.

The story is told that as Gebre Kristos was teaching an art class one day, two students were arguing about Jesus' skin color. One student had painted the portrait of a black Jesus and was insisting that Jesus was black, while another student argued just as strongly that Jesus was white. Gebre Kristos heard the argument, but said nothing. Instead, he went home and made this painting in one night, bringing it with him to class the next day. "This is Jesus," he said. "He is neither Black, nor White or anything in between. He is Pure Blood."

He is pure blood, blood that sustains the life of every human being, blood that runs the same color in every human being, no matter who. All of us are in him. All of us belong to him.

His blood is spattered, splattered, spilled. It's a horrifying image, a violent image, an image that speaks of the violence we did to Jesus and of the violence we do to each other. And yet, the red color is bright, vibrant, pulsating.

Does the figure in the painting look dead ... or alive? Dying, fading away, flaming out ... or full of energy and vitality and power? They meant to kill him, but Jesus' death brought life! There is power in the blood! This is a death that defeats death and a death that shatters the walls that divide us. This is a death that brings life and peace, by the power of God, to Jesus and to us.

This is the death we remember this morning as we share the food and drink of the communion table, a death that means life. So this is not a mournful remembering, but a joyful remembering. We remember Christ has overcome sin and death, injustice and oppression, hatred and division. We remember that Christ is bigger than any of us, and that, in Christ, we are made one.

This is his table -- not ours, not yours. Actually, it is your table and our plate and chalice and pitcher, but just like Solomon's Temple or our churches, we cannot contain the Lord here! But here the Lord chooses to meet us. Here the Lord, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is bigger than all of us invites all of us, each of us, to eat and drink. What a privilege it is to be invited! And what a privilege it is to understand that here Christ tears down any walls that divide us and makes us one.

May our eating together be a witness of the power of Christ to us, and may our eating together be a witness of the power of Christ to the world. Because of him, may we praise the Lord our God with one voice and love the Lord our God with one heart and serve the Lord our God with one hope. May we honor God and God alone with our words and with our lives: eating, drinking, working, praying, singing, dancing ...