

Sermon for Sunday, May 16, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE HOUSE GOD LIVES IN"

Ephesians 2:11-22

Text: "In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling for God." --Ephesians 2:22

Well, today marks the beginning of the intensive phase of our building campaign. In the years of my ministry, I have had the good fortune to conduct a building program of one sort or another in each of my pastorates. So, I guess it is your turn now! However, it may be some comfort to you to know that in each of my previous pastorates I have conducted only one such campaign! Also, I have learned a lot about people in these campaigns. I have learned that when I ask people to give until it hurts, it develops that they have a very low pain threshold! But the fact is, it takes three books to make a good Christian. It takes the Good Book so a man can know God's word. It takes the Hymn Book so a man can sing God's praise. It takes the pocketbook so a man can do God's work.

You know, we Presbyterians are a peculiar breed of people. There are those today who want to do away with denominations, but I think each denomination has a sort of character. People tend to affiliate with a church that has a particular character, that meets their particular needs. And we Presbyterians tend to be a rather unemotional lot who don't care for a great deal of emotion in our services. We like a certain amount of learning in our preachers and insist that they have a college and seminary degree. We tend to be a rather middle-upperclass group. And that is neither good nor bad, it is simply who we are. We are largely professional people of one sort or another and the Presbyterian church happens to suit us rather well.

In the little town I grew up in, I think the character of the churches was reflected by where they were located. For example: the Baptist church was next to the city swimming pool; the Methodists had their church next to the fire house; the Episcopalians located next to the mortuary. And the Presbyterians? Well, on one side was the ice house and on the other side was the bank?

But seriously, Presbyterians, being the type of people they are, are an opinionated, think-for-themselves lot. That's why Presbyterians like their system of government. It gives them a chance to express themselves, and yet it has what we lovingly call "decency and order." And Presbyterians are rarely unanimous on anything! The story is told of the atomic war in which everybody in the world was killed except three Presbyterians. Sunday came and they decided they ought to have church, so one of them drew up an order of worship for them to follow. When time for church came, the leader discovered that one Presbyterian had withdrawn to start a new denomination and the other had drawn up a minority report!

Well, that is part of the fun of being a Presbyterian. Anytime a congregation undertakes anything as large as the building program we have undertaken, there is going to be some disagreement, some dissension, and some mumbling! One member said he was for the parking lot and additions to Centreat, but he was dead set against the education building. Another said he was for the education building, but he wouldn't put a dime in a parking lot. Someone else said he was for putting an elevator in this building, but he wouldn't give a cent to Centreat. Then there are those who say it isn't the right time to build (and, incidentally, I have never been in any church when it was the right time!) Someone else didn't like the way it was presented and someone else said we didn't have enough time to think about it. Well, that's part of being Presbyterian.

But, you know, we Presbyterians are smart enough to know that we have to protect ourselves from ourselves. As a consequence, we have developed a wonderful doctrine to help us deal with our differences. We call it, "being in subjection to our brethren." We Presbyterians, with our concept of majority rule, believe that God speaks to us through the acts of the church. Now, that is not to say that churches and church courts cannot and do not err, but we believe that God ordinarily makes his will known to us in that way. Therefore, we have developed the concept of being in subjection to our brethren. And that means that when the vote is counted and the decision made, all of us pull together. Now, that is a mighty comforting doctrine. You see, if you don't pull together, you will pull to pieces--you will pull apart. So, when an officer of the Presbyterian Church is ordained, he takes an ordination vow in which he promises to be in subjection to his brethren.

When I was a pastor in Dallas, Texas, I had a wonderful Elder in my church who was about eighty years old. He was as spry as could be and as sharp as a tack. I remember once I suggested to the Session that when we had communion we ought to serve the bread and wine together to save time in the service. He asked to table the motion until next meeting. A month later when the Session met he had letters from every leading minister in the denomination saying that it wasn't Presbyterian and we ought not be in a hurry anyway. So, I lost. However, when we voted to build a new education building, he opposed it and that time he lost. But, being a fine Presbyterian in subjection to his brethren, he pitched in. He gave the largest gift to it and worked so hard for it that some of the ladies wanted to name the building after him because they thought it was his idea. Well, that's the way Presbyterians are. When it comes down to it, they pull together. Today we begin the intensive phase of a campaign to raise a million dollars. Different people have had different ideas about what we should build or shouldn't build, of what we should do or what we shouldn't do. But today let's really be Presbyterians. Let's all pitch in and pull together. You see, if we don't pull together, we will pull to pieces.

However, as we begin this campaign, I think there are several things we should have absolutely clear in our minds. First, new buildings, new facilities, are not the issue at all. God doesn't live in buildings. God doesn't live in bricks and mortar. No, God lives in human hearts. God lives in people. If we are just going to build buildings, I'm not willing to give a dime to that. A new building or buildings isn't going to make us a better church or a great church. The only thing that will make our building program worthwhile is for us to take those new facilities and use them as tools, as instruments, to build better boys and girls, better young men and women. They will be of value only if we use them to bring people into a closer, a deeper relationship to Jesus Christ. Buildings won't bring in the kingdom of God. No, buildings are useful only when committed men and women use them as a means of teaching a little child, for reaching a young person, for ministering to an elderly person. And that's what I'm interested in. I believe God is moving in this congregation in a most unusual way. I believe God's spirit is being poured out on us in a special way. I am convinced that God has a unique and special ministry for this congregation in the city of St. Louis. The new facilities are a part of our response to God as we seek to render a better service and develop a bigger ministry. So, I'm not willing to give a dime just to build a new building, but I'm ready to make some real sacrifices to see to it that our ministry is broadened.

So the church isn't buildings--the church is people. Isn't that what our scripture for this morning says? St. Paul says we are members of God's household. And that house is built on the foundation of the apostles. The chief cornerstone is Jesus. And the Bible says that you and I are a part of this building which is a dwelling place for God's Spirit. I hope we remember that. When the workers come to ask you to pledge to the building program, the real program they are talking about concerns the lives of people--people in whom God's Spirit will dwell. You are investing in flesh and blood, in children and youth, in generations yet to be born. And I don't know where else you will find such an investment as that.

Now, one final thing. As your pastor, I feel I have a responsibility to offer you some guidelines for your giving. We are attempting to raise a million dollars over a three-year period. Over and above our annual budget we are asking you to give a special contribution. Since our budget is about half a million dollars, if each giving unit gave twice as much as his annual contribution in addition to that yearly gift, we would raise our million. However, that is not an adequate way to figure our giving. For one thing, some of our people are already giving sacrificially; to ask them to give that much more would be asking quite a bit. On the other hand, many are giving only token amounts and should make some really sizable gifts to this expansion program. I was tremendously pleased to hear one of my Deacon's say the other night, "This building program will give my family a chance to give more because we are not giving what we should now." That will be the case for many of you.

Here is the guideline for your giving: first, give your heart completely to Jesus. You see, he who gives his heart will not deny his money. My family and I tithe our income. Actually, we give more than a tithe for the church provides us a home, and we give to cover that, too. With three children in college this fall, we cannot give without making some real sacrifices and some real changes in our life style. We have committed ourselves to that. Sydney and I have each agreed to give up some things and together we have agreed to some sacrifices. But, as someone has said, shall we call ourselves givers when the gifts we gave have not cost us a single privation? And if your gift does not cost you something, if it does not make a single privation, you will not have given enough.

But let me say this to you. I wouldn't deprive my family of a thing just to build a building. But my family and I will gladly sacrifice and give for the sake of people whose lives will be changed, people who will come to know Jesus, people who will find salvation and eternal life in the Lord. Yes, for that we will give and give and give.

You know, it is easy to pull down, to detract, to criticize--but it is hard to build. Central is going to build--not just buildings, but a church made up of people who know the Lord and who are a dwelling place for His Spirit. And that's what the Christian faith is all about--sharing Jesus with others. My family and I are eager to be a part of that. I hope you are, too.