

Rededication of St. Margaret's Church
St. Margaret of Scotland Episcopal Church, Chicago
May 25, 2008

A House for the Church

I spent most of last week at a conference center in North Carolina with twenty other bishops or so. It was a gathering of what is called The College for Bishops, or "Baby Bishops' School" as we call it sometimes. It's not just bishops from the Episcopal Church in this country who attend, but also some bishops from the Anglican Church of Canada. From one of them I heard a wonderful story about a little boy who after several years of church school was asked by his priest if he could tell him what a saint was. Now, this little guy had the good fortune to attend a church with beautiful stained glass windows ... not unlike this one. So when the priest asked him, "Johnny, can you tell me what a saint is?" Without a moment's hesitation, Johnny replied, "A saint is someone the light shines through!" "And how do you know that?" asked the priest. "Well it's right there in the window," said the slightly exasperated Johnny.

The earliest Christians did not have church buildings. After his death and resurrection, the first followers of Jesus continued to worship in the temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues elsewhere. Beyond the study and worship of the synagogue and temple they gathered in one another's homes to share the meal that Jesus had infused with the new meaning of his own life and death. They shared the eucharist, they baptized and healed and cared for the poor, and lived and proclaimed the resurrection of Christ – all without benefit of a building set apart for the purpose – no altar, no pulpit, no stained glass (and a much smaller budget to boot!).

But as the church expanded out into the late Roman Empire and grew dramatically in numbers, naturally it found the need for buildings of its own. It needed space to accommodate the influx of converts, people who were discovering the power of Christ for living in a new way, people who were daily being added to the Christian community. So at first, larger private homes in which believers had been meeting might be donated to the exclusive use of the church, and as the numbers continued to grow, the private homes would be adapted and expanded. We have fascinating archeological examples of such "house churches" in Syria and elsewhere. The most telling feature of all the buildings used by the church at this time though has little to do with architecture. The most interesting thing to me is the language Christians used about the buildings in which they met. They were never called "The House of God." God doesn't need a house and ancient pagan temples weren't built really as places to meet the gods so much as they were built to keep the gods inside, under control, and safely out of the marketplace and the Pentagon. And whatever else the God of Israel, the God of Jesus might be, controllable he is not. When God revealed his name to Moses at the burning bush, it was a strange kind of name: I am who I am ... or I will be who I will be. You will not control me, Moses. I alone am sovereign, and no sacrifice, no religious system will ever control or contain me.

All this began to change in the fourth century when the Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal and then eventually the preferred religion of the empire. In the space of a

few generations, the Christian movement went in popular thought from being a small, misunderstood, persecuted Jewish sect running a soup kitchen into the fashionable religion of the Emperor's court. Converts flooded in. And in short order, adapting private homes for worship became completely inadequate. The church started moving into Roman public gathering halls, the basilicas – buildings that could hold hundreds or thousands of people. The splendor of imperial ceremonial followed and quickly replaced the earlier intimacy of the Christian people gathered together at table. The home where God's people gathered became a shrine to God's overwhelming power.

Early Christians knew that their buildings were not the House of God. What the earliest Christians called the buildings they adopted or built was this: The House of the Church. *Domus Ecclesiae*. But both the House Church and the Basilica have something to teach us. Both tell us something about the majesty and love of God. Both kinds of buildings have something to say about what happens inside of them, and both can be symbols of the mystery we gather Sunday by Sunday to celebrate. And here's where the little boy and his stained glass window come back in (I bet you were wondering how I was gonna get back to that). Saints are people through whom God's light shines into this dark world – he was right. The beauty of a window, a work of art can point us toward that truth. A building can be a sign of God's presence in this world. I think that's why our church buildings are so important to us. This altar-table stands as a sign of the hospitality of God in this hungry world. That font is a silent witness to the power of God to bring us through the waters of chaos and death into an utterly new kind of life. The art in this building shouts to us that God himself is the source of all beauty, all life, all harmony. The music we make here makes the glory of God real.

And as the reading from 1st Corinthians tells us, we are stewards of it all.

My sisters and brothers, *you* are faithful stewards of all these things. When fire devastated this place, this sacramental sign of the presence of the living God, you did not give in to despair. You were faithful. You were faithful I suspect because you know that God is faithful. The light needed to keep on shining through these windows and walls. And thank God for the witness of this parish to that. As your bishop I cannot thank you enough for your faithfulness to the good news that God will not be contained by these walls ... that God is out there, among our brothers and sisters in this city, in this world, all those in need of love and mercy and care and justice and peace. But I am grateful that you know too that we all need a tangible sign of that truth. That this building, these walls stand as a witness to God's presence with his people. Like Johnny said, it's right there in the window ... and in the walls, and on the table, and in the faces of all of you.

So today is a day for rejoicing, a day for resting quietly in thanksgiving that God is good, always and everywhere good. We have not been forgotten, no more than a child could ever be forgotten by her mother. God has been good to us, and God's goodness knows no end. May this parish, living in this house, grow and flourish. May women and men and children find a home here with God. May St. Margaret of Scotland, celebrating her 118th anniversary continue to witness to the power of God in Christ. Welcome home.