

Feb. 16, 2020 Leviticus 19: 1-4, 9-18; I Corinthians 3: 10-17

Prayer: Dear Lord, How humble we are in your presence. We pray that our worship and our gifts, our music and our words are pleasing to you on this day. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Where God Lives

I once received a letter from prison. A man who had been a regular here, and with whom I had corresponded in prison, wrote me a letter of abject apology.

He said he'd been composing the letter in his head for weeks before committing it to paper. For two pages he apologized for hurting my feelings and disrespecting me.

And for the life of me, I didn't know what he was talking about.

I thought maybe he'd sent me some kind of hateful letter that I'd forgotten, so I went to my paper files. I couldn't find one.

I looked through my computer files to see what I'd written him four years previously. No clues there.

Finally, I wrote him back and said, "I must have forgiven you because I have forgotten any hurt or disrespect."

Now with my memory, there is a chance I received something ugly and said, "Whatever," and threw it away. But I usually keep negative letters. I have a cardboard box in my attic from my newspaper days labeled "Hate mail." It keeps me honest.

But I absolutely don't remember what prompted that letter from the man in prison. I was left to try to figure it out based solely on his apology.

That is the position we find ourselves in with Paul's letters in the New Testament. We have only one side of the conversation. We don't know what the Corinthians may have written him, or what a messenger may have told him about the situation in Corinth.

We have only Paul's reply.

And in the extended reply we know as Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks a lot about divisions in the church. As we talked about two weeks ago, he tells the Corinthians they shouldn't follow him or Apollos or Peter but only Jesus Christ.

So we surmise there was something going on with some church members wanting to follow one leader, and others wanting to follow another.

In reply, Paul talks about the foundation of the church, and how any leader must build on that solid foundation. This foundation is Jesus Christ and his earthly teachings, certainly. But as we look back at Jesus' existence as the Word, from the very beginning of creation, we find that the foundation goes far deeper than his three years of earthly ministry.

Please turn with me to **I Corinthians 3: 10-17**.

10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone

else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Now we American Christians are bad to read everything as personal, as individual. We read this passage, and we think of our bodies as temples. But that's not what Paul is saying. .

His "yous" in those last two verses are plural in the Greek. So you *as a community* are God's temple. You *as a community* are the dwelling place of God.

This is an audacious claim. At the time of this writing, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was still standing. For hundreds of years, since the time of Solomon, the temple was understood as the dwelling place of the Lord.

But now, years before the Romans destroyed that grand building, Paul is suggesting that the Lord's dwelling place is *among believers in Jesus Christ*. He's predicting what gospel writer Matthew will later quote Jesus as saying: **"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."** (Mt. 18: 20)

So where *does* God live? Right here. And at Buncombe Street and Long Branch and First Pres Greer and Prince of Peace and Valley Brook and the Hispanic church on Poinsett. In open-air churches in Central America. In home churches in Cuba. Under trees in Africa. In megachurches in the Philippines. Anywhere that believers are gathered in his name.

And these places, these bodies of believers where the Lord dwells, must be holy and moral and righteous. Anything less will garner the apocalyptic images of Judgment Day fire, Paul says.

Back in 2011, we began construction on the entrance to the Stone Avenue side of our fellowship building. We received a grant from Greenville Women Giving to create a more welcoming, landscaped, double-door entrance to replace the dark little service entrance we had.

Shortly after we got the money, I began receiving emails from Greenville Women Giving: *When is construction going to start? Can*

you give us a time frame? Our committee is meeting and we need a report.

But that side of the building abutted a brick wall and railing built by the South Carolina Department of Transportation. Cue the music from “Jaws.”

Our architect – bless his heart – met meticulously and relentlessly with engineers from the city and from DOT about taking out a section of that brick wall. At one point he told me, “You’d think we were asking to tear down the Governor’s Mansion.”

In addition, the ground sloped every which way. There were pipes that ran underneath Stone Avenue that had to be taken into consideration. Construction required blocking a traffic lane of Stone Avenue. A team of subcontractors had to see what each would do – under the street, under the ground, in the basement.

Now we could have slapped on a porch, cut through a wall and called it a day.

But that building was 85 years old at the time. And if we wanted an entrance that would last another 85 years, we had to take the foundation into account.

So did the church at Corinth. **“No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”**

We wanted to build with gold, silver and precious stones, not wood and hay and straw that would burn on Judgment Day. We wanted that for our entrance. And more importantly, we want that for our church body.

Whenever I leave you alone with Tandy, she preaches from the Old Testament. And you go right there with her. I don't blame you. You cannot touch those Old Testament stories for adventure and narrative tension.

But even more, God’s word to the people of Israel is foundational to our Christian heritage. It is our history. It is our bedrock. Judaism is our foundation.

There’s a story about a young rabbi who was stunned at his first Friday evening service in his new synagogue. A heated debate broke out over whether he should stand or sit while reading the Ten Commandments.

The shaken young rabbi went to visit the oldest member of the congregation – who was in a nursing home – to ascertain what the synagogue’s custom actually was.

After hearing of the acrimonious debate, the old man replied, “That is our custom.”

If you would like to read along from the Jewish Scriptures about the foundation that Paul draws on in his letter to the Corinthians, please turn with me to **Leviticus 19: 1-4, 9-18.**

19The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. ³You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. ⁴Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God. ...

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or

put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

In this passage we clearly hear echoes of the Ten Commandments.

Honor your father and mother. Keep the Sabbath. Don't worship idols.

Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not take the Lord's name in vain. But there's something else here, too, right here in our foundation:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Or as Rush sang for us, “we get to carry each other.”

We get to carry each other.

Jesus, a good Jewish boy, *got* his foremost commandment way back here, in this foundation for how we are to live in community.

Jesus, a member of the Trinity long before his time on earth, *gave* his foremost commandment way back here, in this foundation for how we are to live in community.

The foundation for how we are to be a holy church, a dwelling place for a holy God, is how we treat each other.

How we leave gleanings in the field and grapes in the vineyard even when it cuts into our profit.

How we do not steal or lie or take advantage of one another.

How we care for the disabled.

How we are honest and just and truthful in speech.

These are not good ideas tacked onto the Christian religion. These teachings are at the very foundation of where we came from and who we are.

This is how we must live if we want God to live among us.

Think about that for a moment -- God living among us. God handing out the bulletins and taking up the offering and singing in the choir and serving communion. How might we behave differently if we really believed God was here with us?

We talk to him every week when we pray. We confess to him. We sing praises to him.

But do we believe he is really here? Do we act like he is in the pew, sitting next to us?

What would your feeling be if God were sitting right next to you?

Would it be a rush of love and gratitude and thanksgiving?

Or would it be “Uh, oh”? Would it be a horrible sense of time run out, a gamble gone bad, a realization that “I’ve waited too long.”

We Protestants can be bad about assuming that Christian faith is all about us. It's all about personal salvation. It's all about a personal decision.

But here in the very foundation of our faith, we find instruction about living in community, about caring for the poor and disabled, about honoring our parents, about not stealing or lying or defrauding or slandering, about being honest employers and judges, about loving family and neighbor.

This is how we are holy.

This is how we gather in Jesus' name.

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,” God told the people of Israel.

“God's temple is holy, and you are that temple,” Paul told the church at Corinth.

This is the foundation on which the church at Triune is built. Let us be worthy of it. Amen.

