

**The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn**

2/13/11

**Holy of Holies**

1 Corinthians 3: 16-23

I have spent a lot of time in churches. This may seem obvious since I'm a pastor but I'm not talking about as an adult. Some of you may know that my mother is a DCE (director of Christian education) at a church. She has been for years and her work meant many hours of time at church. It really became a second home for me. I felt so comfortable I could have run barefoot through the place and napped on any one of its many couches. I could have done those things, and probably did, except for one part of the church: the sanctuary. The sanctuary had an entirely different set of rules and they were strictly and swiftly enforced: no running in the sanctuary; no yelling; no hitting each other in there; no kicking the pews; wear the best that you have when you go there; treat the place with respect; give it honor.

There were a lot of expectations about how I treated the sanctuary but if I thought my church's sanctuary got special treatment, it was nothing compared to the treatment other, earlier, sanctuaries received. There is no greater example of this than the sanctuary of sanctuaries: the Temple in Jerusalem. In that sanctuary you not only had to be physically clean—you had to wash your hands and your head—but you had to be ritually clean as well. This meant praying and reading scripture and fasting for a day or days or even longer. Depending on how unclean you were you might even need to cover yourself with ash (which seems ironic!). All of this just so you could enter the building. That doesn't even take into account the Holy of Holies, that center of the sanctuary where they believed God lived. Nobody went in there; no one. Except one priest one time each year and he had to show himself to be the most faithful the most pure.

Though this behavior may seem extreme, we can still understand the heart of it. We have the same feeling about our sanctuary; about wanting to care for it and respect it. It is such a place of holiness. Not all the time, of course, but there are those brief glimpses when we meet God here. Perhaps it is that morning when all of the white lilies have so carefully been laid out in a cross and we smell their scent and, for just one second, Christ is risen all over again. Or maybe it is a particular window, the way it was fashioned and catches the light. When the sun shines through it God's presence surrounds you and the air doesn't even feel the same as before. For many of you, I know the music has brought you to that place of communion with God. The voices of the choir or the organ as they fall from the loft and rush toward us, it is as if we can hear God's own voice is booming down. We have met God here, in this place. Not every time. It is not a switch we control. Still, this sanctuary, this temple, has become holy for us.

Can we say the same for ourselves? Do we treat our own bodies and minds, hearts and lives, with such care? Has our life become something holy for us? It is a remarkable thought but Paul, in this letter to the Corinthian church, is teaching something remarkable. He tells them, You know the Temple—that place where God lives and the place from which God speaks, well, the Temple is no longer a building. The Temple is you. You are the place God lives now and it is through you God chooses to speak. This means that all of that honor and respect you've shown to the Temple, to the sanctuary, because you met God there, you now must give that honor and respect to yourself as well. Just like the sanctuary, there are some rules here: don't run roughshod over the gifts God has given you. Don't yell at yourself or beat yourself down. Encourage within yourself only the best you have for you should treat yourself with respect and honor. God now chooses to live in you, to speak from you.

Don't you know, Paul asks, that you are God's Temple? Your body is holy so don't hate it or fight it. Your heart is sacred so don't trample it or neglect it. Your whole life is like the holiest of holies, the most sacred thing to God. It is too precious to waste it away on regret or worry. You are my home now, God says, so treat my home well.

This is hard. It is hard to love ourselves like that, treating ourselves with even the kind of respect we show this room. As hard as this is, Paul makes it even more difficult. For actually, he does not say "You" are the Temple. He says "you all" are the Temple. When we come together we become the sanctuary, God's home in the world and God's voice to the world. We can barely fathom respecting ourselves as if we were holy, much less everyone else! Our faith demands this difficult work of community. There is no "going it alone" for Christians. We cannot simply enter this room, all alone and worship and honor God in solitude. It is not as tidy as all of that. We show our worship for God in how we work with one another. We show honor and respect for God when show honor and respect for one another.

Because it's just like this sanctuary, you know. Just like this sanctuary, God will not just arrive on command, responding to some flip we have switched. No, God shows up when care has been taken and people's gifts have been shared. The same is true of us, God's new Temple. If we ever want to catch a glimpse of him living in us or speaking through us, we've got to take care of one another, share our gifts together, show respect and honor for one another. Then, and only then, may God choose to be revealed. Being a temple really puts us in our place. On the one hand, we owe ourselves and one another such honor and respect—we are the Holy of Holies—and on the other hand we know we can never be holier than thou for we are only the place. We are stewards of God's presence in this world, not the presence itself. All we can do is ready ourselves as they readied the Temple—as we ready this sanctuary—in hopes that the time will come when God will meet us.

It reminds me of the word "ole". You know, the word Spaniards shout when they watch bull fighting or flamenco dancing. Do you know, however, what the word means? Now "Ole" is what folks in Spain show when they see an impressive feat of bravery or skill, but originally "ole" came from an ancient word for God. When the people would see a dancer or hear a singer who, though they had danced or sung their piece a thousand times, on that one night, in that single turn or single note, it was no longer the person dancing. It was no longer that person singing. It was God. I know you have had this experience as well; when the person is nothing more than a conduit for God's work. When the people would see this they would point and say, "Ole". "God, God. That is God right there." The dancer, the singer, they could not manufacture the moment, the glimpse of God. But they could prepare themselves to be ready for it; to be available for God to show up. As a people and as a church may we ready ourselves so that, maybe one day, others will point and say, "Ole, Ole, in that congregation. I see God right there and there. God, God, Ole, Ole." Amen.