

The Empty Temple
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship Communion
Thursday, June 23, 2011

There's an old Gospel tune that goes something like this "I want to be ready, I want to be ready, I want to be ready to walk in Jerusalem just like John!" If you get there before I do (walk in Jerusalem just like John; tell all my friends that I'm a comin' too...walk in Jerusalem just like John; I want to be ready, I want to be ready, I want to be ready—to walk in Jerusalem just like John. Are you ready to visit Jerusalem with me? Because this afternoon we are going to walk into Jerusalem together—just like John and just like Jesus.

Ever since I became a Christian, I've had a fantasy about being able to visit the Holy Land, and particularly, the Holy City of Jerusalem. I know, I know, the good old UU hymn by Ed Wilson that so many of our churches sing asks the musical question "Where is our Holy Land?" and the right answer is supposed to be "within the human soul, wherever free minds truly seek with character the goal," but that holy land is too abstract for me. In my heart, I have a holy land! And it's a real place! It's the place where Jesus walked and taught. It's all the nearly places in my Bible that are as familiar to me as the names of the streets in the neighborhood where I live – Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Cana, Bethlehem, and of course Jerusalem. Because of the gift of sabbatical, my husband and I will be visiting Israel, Palestine and of course, Jerusalem; one the holiest and one of the most troubled cities on earth.

I have never been to Jerusalem, so in my mind's eye, it looks like a distillation of all the Jesus movies I've ever seen, but standing in the center of my imagination of that crowded, hot, bright, dusty city stands a wall—known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall—the wall of what's left of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, perhaps the very same temple where Jesus has his righteous and famous meltdown at the money changers and those who were selling their wares in the courtyard outside the temple.

Now those of you who have been to the Holy City of Jerusalem know what is really there at this great temple--maybe some of you have touched it--maybe prayed at it — but what is left is, of course, nothing but a wall—but a wall that was believed to be closes to the inner sanctum of the Temple—the Holy of Holies. . I want to see that wailing wall because it's also a place where Christians can uncover some of the most profound meanings of what is truly involved in being a Christian. Just as Jesus circled back to Jerusalem and to the temple, so we must take this journey to the Temple, before we take communion, at the Temple. In order to do that, I want you to walk with me into Jerusalem and into the outer courtyards.

Outside the Temple, in the outer courtyard was primarily a bazaar—a flea market atmosphere, with vendors hawking souvenirs, sacrificial animals, food, if you were a Nazarite, you could get a shave and a haircut, and as Jesus so rudely noted and condemned – money changers! The temple was an elaborate

construction, with over an entrance and gates, but getting into the heart of the temple wasn't easy. The temple was designed to keep out the unclean and unfit; women weren't allowed past the women's gate; and the unclean and those who weren't priests but if you wanted to get to the Holy of Holies—well, that was roped off and veiled and only the highest priest on the holiest times of the year could enter it. This was the place where God was believe to dwell—it was God's landing pad, where he pitched his tent, camped out to hear prayers and accept sacrifices, the place where his secret name was spoken—the place where Solomon once proclaimed at the dedication of the first Temple, that surely now, this was a place where God would dwell—forever – but of course, we know, that's not what happened.

What happened was that in 70 CE the Roman Emperor Titus conquered the city of Jerusalem. The Romans not only destroyed much of Jerusalem, they destroyed the Second Temple, and although the Psalmist is describing the destruction of the first Temple, we can hear much of the same chaos, as Frederic Buechner describes, “all the carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers—they set the sanctuary on fire— the massive cedar beams overlaid with gold thundering to the floor, the hiss of flames as it sweeps away all the carvings; you can hear the heavy thundering feet of the Roman Soldiers as they steal the spoils of their looting—the golden lampstands, the silver bowls, the menorah. Who can ever forget it, the burning embers floating through the sky and the terrible

heat of it as the priests scattered before it like dead leaves before the wind?”

¹taking with them the spoils from the temple—they took the two thousand golden lampstands and the six hundred and seventy two silver bowls, and the three thousand washing bowls. And, as the soldiers made their way through the labyrinthian passages their excitement mounted because they were about to reach the Holy of Holies, the sacred spot where clearly the real spoils—the richest—most significant riches of the Jews must be kept. The philosopher Jacques Derrida has written about that moment in these words:

“When the Roman army finally captured it, their general broke into the temple’s Holy of Holies and was astonished to find only emptiness at its center. No image of God, no incredibly valuable gold or silver....(Imagine) the ingenuous surprise of a non-Jew when he violates the tabernacle, when he enters the dwelling or the temple and after so many ritual detours to gain access to the secret center—he discovers nothing—only nothingness. No center, no heart, an empty space, nothing.”

So there was no-thing at the center of this great temple. There were no candlesticks, no fine lavar bowls of silver, no lampstands of gold, or throne of ivory. There was nothing for thieves to steal. There was no-thing, but God at the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies—no-thing, but the Presence of that which you cannot see.

¹ Buehner, Frederick. A Room Called Remember, pg. 116

The destruction of the Second Temple is usually understood as the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora, the moment at which the Jews lost their home and that God lost God's temple. It's a very powerful story and image of what's involved in sustaining a religious community.

Jesus did not witness the destruction of the Temple, although he prophesized its end. You see, Jesus shared the opinion of the prophet Jeremiah about the temple of his day--that the people mistook the sign of the thing for the thing itself; mistook the temple for God . But Jesus had the mad courage to said "No, I will be your dwelling place. I will be your dwelling place! If you abide with me it matters not where you call your home."

Jesus had this crazy idea idea that salvation is not in the temple, but not in the marketplace either -- not in the shopping mall,

not in the convention center,

not on Wall Street or Main Street, n

ot in the office,

not in the ice cream parlor,

not in the grocery store,

not at the gun convention,

not in the movie theatre,

not in the beauty salon,

not on the golf course, but it is in HIM, and he said “let me be your dwelling place, for lo, I am with you, even at the end of time.” So why do I want to go visit a wall in Jerusalem – a wall you have to travel thousands of miles to get to, a wall that is cracked and that will crumble, a wall that I know does not hold God. Maybe it’s because it’s a wall whose cracks hold prayers. Maybe it’s because you might still get a scent of a sacrifice if you go there, maybe just the faintest whiff of God. Maybe it’s because sometimes I feel more like a Jew than a Christian, a Jew wandering in the wilderness, looking for a promised land and the Unitarian Christian temple that I can call home.

Truly, Christian UU’s have no dwelling place—we have no Holy of Holies— if we ever did, it’s no longer in King’s Chapel or even in Boston. If we are here, the Holy of Holies for our band of wanderers has to be right here now -- here in Room 203A & B– this has to be our temple.

And maybe not just here in this room-- maybe our temple is truly where we came from, where we live, whether in Tulsa, Oklahoma or in Akron, Ohio or in Cheyenne Wyoming -- everywhere the story of Jesus is told and heard and everywhere a Unitarian Universalist realizes I can be Christian and Unitarian Universalist and there is no division between the two – that’s where our temple has to be. I have been privileged to hear the stories from so many of you who want to be Christian, who want to worship with other Unitarian Universalist Christians— not

Methodist Christians,
not Presbyterian Christians,
not Baptist or Lutheran or Episcopalian or Disciples of Christ Christians
but Unitarian Universalists Christians—and there is no place for you to go,
because in the temple you would call home — maybe the only church you can
attend, there is no one like me, you say, or if there were, we would not be able to
worship there. You say that if you did start a Christian group in your church you
would not be given space, your loyalty to Unitarian Universalism would be
questioned, your request for a room denied, your newsletter blurb edited, so as not
to offend. I get that—I get how annoying it is when you are at coffee hour and you
hear someone tell you: “the last place I want to hear the word God is in my own
church!” It’s hurtful to pull into the church parking lot to see a bumper sticker that
says: *God: The Imaginary Friend for Grown Ups*. What we sometimes do as
Christians when we hear that is to become stridently defensive or retreat into sullen
silence. At times like these, I wonder if the Holy of Holies really is truly empty—
if there is not only no-thing, but there is nothing—all absence, no Presence! I
wonder if God has been pushed so far out of contemporary Unitarian Universalist
temples that She is back out in the wilderness, looking for another dwelling place.

So, if our God is out wandering, just like us, and if there is no temple that
will be our true home —what are we supposed to do? How are we to practice our
Christian faith, in small groups, or in pairs, or all by ourselves? How do we sustain

ourselves day by day? Ah, sometimes the answers come through prayer; and sometimes through song...*Day by day—day by day—Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray—to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day* — that’s my answer.

Now, wait—how can you *see God more clearly* when to see God’s face is a death sentence? How can you see a God whose whole persona is to be unseen? “If you see me,”—says Jesus, you see God. I look at you—I look at God—I look at you—says Mother Teresa. “You don’t need a temple, you don’t need a church home, you just need to see the world through my eyes...”

To love thee more dearly—how can I love something that I cannot hold? Ah, but I can do something that Unitarian Universalists know how to do very well—I can love the *idea* of God made manifest in the person of Jesus and that will be enough. And maybe I can’t hold the hand of God, but I can hold yours—and that too, will be enough.

To follow thee more nearly—how can you follow a God whose Plan I often disagree with; whose absence I feel as often as God’s Presence? I can’t see God, but God has left traces for me to follow, and I can see those traces through the teachings of Jesus. One of the most comforting things about being a liberal Christian is our knowledge that the Holy of Holies can be found anywhere on earth—anywhere where Christians abide and Jesus’ name is remembered. Today we are affirming that the Holy of Holies can be found in the Presence of the

Eucharist; in the very real presence that is embodied in the symbol of the bread and the wine, even when it is served in a convention center and not a church; and so the Holy of Holies can yes, even be found in the midst of our theologically mongrel churches, because whether we acknowledge it or not—God ‘s Presence abides even where there is perceived absence.

I worry how often those of us who claim to be Christians allow our enthusiasm for this faith to be so easily stolen by the unchallenged remark at coffee hour or the unquestioned bumper sticker. We become our own worst enemy—surrendering something that we feel is precious in the din of our own theological marketplace of our Unitarian Universalist temple.

I used to feel that way too. I wondered if I could stay within Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes it felt like I had to defend or explain or ignore comments about my theological orientation. It seemed that everyone was squabbling in the temple where I worshipped: the Jews were hurt when Passover was ignored; the Pagans longed for more ritual , the atheists were disturbed by so many references to God, the Christians lobbied for Communion, the Buddhists—well, nothing seemed to bother them. But as I grew in my faith as a Christian Unitarian Universalist, I came to see it not as a badge to defend, but a practice to live in community with others. And in the midst of this struggle, I engaged with my parishioner, John, who reminded me of how God’s Presence can be found in the Absence in our Unitarian Universalist Temple.

John is a complete secular humanist atheist who happens to love church, and who would constantly complain whenever I used the word God, preached from the Bible or spoke about anything “spiritual.” John was also the guy who said “yes” to being a greeter and yes to taking the seniors shopping and yes to our ministry when it was in trouble. John was the only one who said yes to hosting a lunch when the UU Christians came to our church for their Revival. He had only one request—that he be allowed to put signs on the table “*Today’s Lunch Hosted by Atheists,*” followed by inspirational quotes by Madelyn O’Hare. When my father died he hugged me tightly and said “your dad was really great.” After church one Sunday, John came up to me, and I braced myself, fully expected to withstand another long lecture about God being a bunch of hooey, but instead, he took me by the shoulders and said “Kathleen, I’ve had what you Christians would call an epiphany. I realized something about you and me and about Unitarian Universalism. He said “Unitarian Universalism—it needs all of us. It needs me—the atheist; and you—the Christian; and Len the Jew and Connie the Pagan—it needs all of us,” to which I promptly exclaimed “thank God John and he said “no God to thank!”

I thank John for that line, that Unitarian Universalism needs all of us when I am faced with those who do not understand why I stay in this faith and why I will never leave, and why I encourage everyone of you who may face your own version of John to say simply “Unitarian Universalism needs all of us.”

And, while his epiphany isn't anything earthshaking, what is new is a deeper level of commitment to this faith. Through our relationship with one another over time, we both realized that neither one of us didn't want to live in a church that was just like me. As a Christian in diaspora, I want to find my temple and see it as the place where God abides—and, I want to love that God as dearly as I love John and I want to follow that God through the example and teachings of Jesus. And how do we do this? How do we manage all this? Simple. Day by day by day by day by day.....music begins...to play—Kristin begins singing.