

“A House Not Made with Hands”

June 6, 2021

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13—5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Recently I read about a man, whom I had heard of but didn't know much about, named Bede Griffiths. He was a Benedictine monk who lived during the 20th century, born in 1906 and died in 1993. He spent many years in India where he became part of what's known as the “Christian ashram movement,” something I had never heard of at all. Bede was interested in exploring the intersection of Christianity and Hinduism, what each could learn from the other and how Christianity might benefit from Hindu thought and practices.

Brother Bede wrote several books on this topic and once, as part of his research, he conducted an informal survey by asking a variety of people the question, “Where do you find God?” He said invariably Buddhist and Hindu people pointed to themselves, to their hearts; they find God within them. But with an almost equal consistency Jewish, Muslim and Christian people pointed up or out; God is not within them but outside them.

Based on this portion of 2nd Corinthians, it's pretty clear Paul would disagree. I've always thought of Paul as the first theologian in the church, but these days I also think he was our first mystic. A mystic is interested in experiencing the presence of the Divine as an inner reality, so when Paul says, “even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day,” he's making the case that every person who is attached to Jesus as Lord is capable of finding God within them.

In other letters Paul describes his own mystical experiences, and he does that so naturally that I'm inclined to think it was fairly common. In other words, I don't think Paul is unique among Jews to have these sort of out of body experiences of the Divine Presence. What may be unique, though, is his belief that in Christ God has made it possible for every one of us to know that Presence in our lives. It's no longer limited to a select few.

Over the years here at North we have studied various spiritual disciplines. The purpose of practicing those disciplines is to bring us into a deeper relationship with God. They aren't meant to make us more moral or more likeable; it's not a self-improvement program. The end we're hoping to reach is to know God within us, to live in communion with God. In a sense those disciplines are how “a house not made with hands” is constructed within us. You might say we become a dwelling place for God.

This story in Mark's gospel points out some of the obstacles that can exist in our lives to prevent that construction from taking place. Using a typical progression for him, Mark tells us a story within a story. First we hear about Jesus' family coming out to restrain him, maybe reel him in, because he's saying or doing things that put him at risk. Then, suddenly, we're hearing about a contingent of scribes from Jerusalem making accusations about the source of his power.

Jesus can give as good as he gets. He wastes no time dispatching these scholars with impenetrable logic and turning the tables on them by accusing them of doing something unforgiveable. Incidentally, if you've ever feared you've committed the "unforgiveable sin," your fear, by definition indicates you haven't. I think Jesus is talking about a willful rejection of the Holy Spirit's movement by those who know full well it is present. I don't think any of us is guilty of that.

Finally, the story ends by taking us back to Jesus' family who are trying to stop him. It's here that we learn just how thoroughly Jesus has redefined his life and, by extension, the lives of those around him. Family is no longer bound by biology and blood. Family is found wherever we live in God's presence together. What we have in this sequence are two ways Jesus is reframing reality for those who follow him. He's facing the obstacles that arise, from society or from those closest to us, when we seek to experience God's presence in our lives.

And no one understands those obstacles better than Paul. He himself was a victim of torture and persecution for the gospel. And he knows how hard it is for members of the communities he's founded around the Empire. He knows they are afflicted by hardship and rejection, possibly even violence. Yet through it all he encourages them to "not lose heart." They need to reframe their reality just as Jesus does, to become aware of the house not made with hands being built within them.

As I've thought about that attitude and Paul's words of encouragement, a song started echoing in my mind that I've come to associate with a particular group here in Buffalo. If you go to the website of the Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus you'll find a little history of their organization. They were established in 1999 as part of a movement called GALA Choruses, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. That group was incorporated in 1983, around the time the AIDS epidemic began.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of AIDS. Many of us have forgotten how devastating the epidemic was within the gay community. Aside from the ravages of the disease itself, those who contracted it also often were exposed in a way they never intended. Many gay men who were HIV positive lost jobs and friends, and even family. They had to redefine themselves and their circles of relationships. Organizations like the Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus provided a network of friends for support and encouragement at a time when for many it seemed like their world was falling apart.

I'll never forget the first concert of the BGMC Beth and I attended. It was at the Riviera Theatre in North Tonawanda, their Christmas show. It was so much fun! But at the end they sang a piece that wasn't about Christmas. It's a song they sing to close every concert, and when they do they invite anyone in the audience who is a past member of the Chorus, people who have had to drop away for one reason or another but are still part of the family. They sang a song I had come to associate with words like these of Paul's, words of encouragement and hope. In spite of everything these men have been through themselves or seen others close to them go through

because of illness or personal struggle or rejection by friends and family, they're able to lift this song of hope:

*My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

“We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” Friends, open your hearts to the house God longs to make within you. For we are part of Christ's family, his mothers, sisters and brothers, and no matter what we endure, we have nothing to fear.

Amen