

II Samuel 7:1-14a ¹ Now when the king was settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” ³ Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind, for the Lord is with you.” ⁴ But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, ⁵ “Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ ⁸ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel, ⁹ and I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place and be disturbed no more, and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel, and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

II Samuel 7:1-14a

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“A House of Cedar”

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When I was a kid—probably an elementary aged school child or so—my little brother and I liked to get up on Saturday mornings every now and then and try to surprise my parents with breakfast in bed. The thought in our minds, of course, was that we wanted to do something really great for mom and dad. So we’d sneak into the kitchen, pull out the Jiffy mix, and shake, shake, shake it into a big bowl. Then we’d pour in the water and stir like mad, oblivious to the fact that a fine layer of Jiffy dust had settled over the entire surrounding area. After we had batter, we’d drag a kitchen chair across my mom’s beautiful, but oh-so-scratchable kitchen floor, prop it up next to the stove, and turn on the burner that was, of course, the furthest away from the counter where we had set the bowl of batter. Next, we’d bring over the sort-of lumpy pancake batter, stand up on the chair, and drip, drip, drip all the way across the stove as we tried to pour the batter out for pancakes. Yeah, we’re making pancakes! Of course, what we usually wound up with were mangled messy looking things—nowhere near as neat as mom’s—and a big mess. If we were lucky enough to get the whole meal put together without waking up mom and dad, we then traipsed through the house with food and drink precariously balanced on a cookie sheet and emerged with it in a part of the house where—under normal circumstances—food was not allowed. But it’s okay ‘cause we’re doing something nice for mom and dad!

My parents would return to the kitchen to find a layer of Jiffy dust over everything, hard and crusty batter drips on the floor and stove, sticky syrup residue on the counter and refrigerator handle, and an obscene pile of dishes which could not go in the dishwasher. To my parents’ credit, they were always able to see that good intentions lay behind the gesture, and they were good sports. But as children, we never noticed the mess. It never occurred to us that the gift we had given mom and dad

was a rose with hidden thorns. As so it was that while being praised for our thoughtfulness, my little brother and I had to learn about clean-up time. Cleaning up one's own mess is clearly a learned phenomenon. To accomplish it, one must be taught to see a bigger picture.

In his book *Everything I Ever Needed to Know, I Learned In Kindergarten*, Robert Folgrum notes that cleaning up one's own mess is one of those life skills every kindergartener must learn. Mastering the ability to put away toys and wash dishes, however, is only the beginning of mastering the art of cleaning up messes. That's because messes come in all shapes and sizes. Interestingly, "Clean up your messes" also happens to be Rule #45 according to Leroy Jethro Gibbs on NICS, which confirms that it's not a skill we master in childhood. The older we get, the more likely it becomes that our mess will not be a physical disruption in our surroundings as it is a predicament—a social situation where not have thought through a matter puts us in the awkward position of having to backtrack, to apologize for our actions or take back a commitment without honoring it. Adult-sized messes are a good deal more sticky.

Perhaps more than any other figure in the Hebrew scriptures, David has a knack for getting himself into one adult-sized mess after another. I must admit, it is precisely for this reason that David has always been one of my favorites. He may be remembered by some as the dashing boy-wonder who rushed out against Goliath and felled the giant with a slingshot. But we cannot forget that David is a complex figure and is utterly human. He messes up time and time again, but God still chooses him, even favors him, and from my perspective, that's encouraging. His most famous mess, of course, is his affair with Bathsheba, where he covers up the mess of his own sexual indiscretion with an even bigger mess—deliberately sending her husband into the most dangerous line of fire in the war and making sure that he dies.

But our Scripture lesson this morning happens before David has gotten himself into that mess. The complicated thing about this morning's lesson is that David doesn't seem to have messed up! In fact, he does a pretty good job of thinking ahead and covering his bases, checking his ideas out with the prophet before publicizing his intentions, just in case. And what about David's initial intentions? What's so wrong about wanting to build God a temple? After all, peace has settled on Jerusalem, and David is conscious of his many blessings. He's been victorious in war and has been richly bestowed with earthly goods. Moreover, David isn't vain about it—he KNOWS that God is responsible for his good fortune.

We can relate to David, can't we? Many of us try to be mindful of the blessings in our life. We give our thanks to God in prayer, but we also give thanks by supporting God's work on earth. We sacrifice our time and resources every year to maintain our church—to keep its mission running and its physical condition beautiful. We support charities and causes that we believe in. David wants to do that. This doesn't seem to be a story about messing up at all!

But then, perhaps many of us could also relate to an unconscious desire of David's as well. And that is, to find a way to make God feel permanent in our lives. Scholars have debated back and forth about what kind of political prestige might have come or not come to David based on his building of a grand temple, but I honestly believe that David's primary motivation was NOT political, but heartfelt faith in God. David wanted to ensure that God would be remembered in the hearts of his people: that all their past—the deliverance from Egypt, the wandering in the desert, the gift of a homeland—all this must remain a part of the collective memory of the people of Israel. The world is a dangerous and scary place sometimes. David knows that only too well – he's had to run for his life more than once. And he undoubtedly believed he could ensure that his people would remain faithful by constructing a national place of worship—a permanent structure to stand for all time. That way, God would be permanent, unforgettable. The problem, at least for God, isn't the unforgettable part, but the permanent part. David's house of cedar for God may as well be a prison cell. Therein lies the potential for David's mess. In seeking to honor God, David threatens to limit God.

Now, lest we begin to wonder if we've constructed millions of prisons for God in every church we've built, let me remind us that the theology surrounding the temple in David's day was vastly different than the theology surrounding the construction of our churches. To us, people are the church. You and I make up the church of Jesus Christ. Over the past several years, we've welcomed several to our family who have, for one reason or another, had to give up their building. But the mission remains, as does the bond that unites us. This beautiful building is a tool for ministry, but were it to burn to the ground tomorrow, the mission, ministry, and identity of First United Methodist Church would continue. We're bonded by blood—the blood of Jesus Christ.

But to the Israelites, God's 'Kavod' (*a Hebrew word meaning God's glorious and overwhelming presence*) God's 'Kavod' inhabited the holy of holies—the innermost sanctuary of the temple where only the high priest could enter. Many scholars today suggest that this passage was originally recorded by those who felt building the temple was a dangerous move—those who feared that a temple would institutionalize God, that an authoritarian priesthood would replace God's reign and that the worship of God would become routine and could lack genuine commitment.

I would guess that both of us could see both sides of this issue. Certainly, we relate to David's desire to praise God with the gifts he's been given. We relate to his desire to keep God unforgettable. But we also relate to the fear that institutionalization of the faith can become routine and lack commitment. More importantly, most of us understand that God is bigger than a temple—we understand God to be illimitable, for such is the nature of faith.

But we are not free to sit back and breathe a sigh of relief, assuming that we are no longer in danger of making David's mistake. On the contrary, our history and our present is littered with examples of times when we've tried to shut God up within a grand temple of cedar. One of the most powerful examples comes from the diaries of John Wesley.

Remember that Wesley had witnessed his own mother, Susanna Wesley, offering instruction on the Word when the preacher sent to fill in for her husband while he was in jail was not well received, and she had quite an influence on his life and spiritual development.

In the 1760s, Wesley received word about an active and stalwart woman named Sarah Crosby in one of the Methodist societies who experienced the call to preach. There were some within her group that agreed, and they petitioned Wesley on her behalf. But there were also many who did agree because she was a woman and scripture seemed clear in the conviction that woman shall not have authority over men. John Wesley reveals in his personal entries that he found himself in quite a conundrum. He knew that if he allowed a woman to preach, his fledgling societies could very well suffer significant losses, and many who might otherwise have come to know Christ would lose the opportunity. On the other hand, Wesley was extremely reluctant to deny the legitimacy of this woman's claim because he was unwilling to limit God. He reasoned that God can call whomever God wants, and she had all the marks of one anointed by God's Spirit to preach the Gospel. His solution was to allow a few 'exceptional cases' where a woman clearly has the mark of God upon her and commission these women as "exhorters". They include Sarah Crosby, Mary Fletcher Bosanquet, Grace Murray, Sarah Taft, Hannah Ball, Elizabeth Ritchie, and Sarah Mallet.

Today, we continue to struggle against building houses of cedar for God in our thinking. We are in danger every time we become so polarized over a particular issue that we fail to see the humanity of others and only see issues—when our language deteriorates to us and them, to "my side", and love for those we disagree with vacates the scene. We are in danger in our prayer life when we assume that something is impossible and so we refuse to ask it of God, we refuse to try. We are in danger when we look at a teenager from the inner city, at a drunk, a prisoner, a homeless person, at a C student, a mediocre employee, an average Joe, and automatically assume that they will never amount to anything.

We are in danger when we doubt ourselves and draw inward in fear rather than opening ourselves to letting God work through us. Everyday, we build houses of cedar in our hearts and minds, and we shut God up within them.

But consider how God responds to David's desire to build a temple in the concluding verses of this morning's lesson: Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

What a fascinating thing God does here, much like a parent seeking to validate good intentions. God makes David aware of the bigger picture. God gives him the promise of a future—a reason to hope. God promises David that Jesus will come. God responds to David's limiting with an example of freedom. You will not build me a house. I will build you one—a house that culminates in the person of Jesus the Christ and frees us not only from sin and death, but from the limitations we place on ourselves and on God. In this house, God is the architect, Jesus the cornerstone and people the foundation. In this house, there isn't a lease, and there are no ceilings. In this house, you don't have to mortgage it if you mess up because grace is the major stipulation in the contract. We have been challenged to search for the bigger picture, to question our own intentions, to step outside of ourselves and examine our little internal houses of cedar.

Have we crossed a line from standing for what we believe to fighting and hatred? Have we lost sight of people in our quest to deal with issues? Have we wandered from commitment to routine? How many doors have we believed are locked without even checking to be sure? How many houses have we constructed as traps? But hear the good news: Jesus has the power to rip away the ceilings that limit us and God, to open the doors we think are closed, and to tear down the walls that separate us from one another. Christ is building something bigger – a Kingdom with a solid foundation in Jesus' Word and his very own blood. Thanks be to God! Amen!