

If These Walls Could Talk....¹

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

September 29, 2019—50th Anniversary of the Sanctuary's Dedication

- Psalm 84 (Good News Translation)
¹ How I love your Temple, LORD Almighty! ² How I want to be there! I long to be in the LORD's Temple. With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God. ³ Even the sparrows have built a nest, and the swallows have their own home; they keep their young near your altars, LORD Almighty, my king and my God. ⁴ How happy are those who live in your Temple, always singing praise to you. ⁵ How happy are those whose strength comes from you, who are eager to make the pilgrimage to Mount Zion. ⁶ As they pass through the dry valley of Baca, it becomes a place of springs; the autumn rain fills it with pools. ⁷ They grow stronger as they go; they will see the God of gods on Zion. ⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty. Listen, O God of Jacob! ⁹ Bless our king, O God, the king you have chosen. ¹⁰ One day spent in your Temple is better than a thousand anywhere else; I would rather stand at the gate of the house of my God than live in the homes of the wicked. ¹¹ The LORD is our protector and glorious king, blessing us with kindness and honor. He does not refuse any good thing to those who do what is right. ¹² LORD Almighty, how happy are those who trust in you!
- 1 Peter 2:4-10 (Good News Translation) ⁴ Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by people as worthless but chosen by God as valuable. ⁵ Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For the scripture says, "I chose a valuable stone, which I am placing as the cornerstone in Zion; and whoever believes in him will never be disappointed." ⁷ This stone is of great value for you that believe; but for those who do not believe: "The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all." ⁸ And another scripture says, "This is the stone that will make people stumble, the rock that will make them fall." They stumbled because they did not believe in the word; such was God's will for them. ⁹ But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light. ¹⁰ At one time you were not God's people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: This place of worship is holy, and we are holy, because God is holy.

Jon: This coming Saturday marks the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of this space we're now sitting in. A few of you were part of this church when this sanctuary was built. You might remember the excitement of the evening of Sunday, October 5, 1969 at 8 p.m. when this new sanctuary was dedicated. The Rev. Ken Shafer was here – he represented the presbytery. Our ministers at that time – Dr. Jim Walker and Edward Pierson, were joined in the service by church member Howard Holan who chaired the Building Committee. Mr. Holan presented the building keys to the pastor. The president of The College of Wooster, Dr. J. Garber Drushal, preached the sermon that night entitled, "New Stones from Old Walls."
I didn't want this fiftieth anniversary to pass without thinking back over the years to consider what this building has meant to us. I wondered who I might invite to be part of this service, to share their thoughts about the blessing this building has been to us. After all, a lot has happened in this room in the past half-century. If only these walls could talk....

¹ Based on a sermon of the same title originally preached October 9, 1994

Then it occurred to me, “These walls *can* talk!” On one of my walks around and around this sanctuary, I became acquainted with our two special guests this morning. You might remember meeting them on the sanctuary’s “silver anniversary” twenty-five years ago in 1994. Please welcome back to the pulpit [*Jon places bricks on pedestal*] Mortimer Mortar and Brenda Brick. Good morning, Brenda, Mortimer....

Brenda: Hello!

Morty: Please, call me Morty.

Jon: Fine, Morty. Welcome to our worship service. Say hello to the people of Rocky River Presbyterian Church.

Brenda: Oh, we know who they are. We see them every week.

Jon: Of course you do. We’re honored that you’ve agreed to speak to us again this morning. You’ve seen a lot over the past fifty years and we’d like to hear about it. But before that, may I ask where you’re from?

Morty: I’m from right here in Ohio, a clay pit near Youngstown.

Brenda: I’m a southern belle, Jon – I’m from a quarry in the Atlanta area.

Jon: And you two met where?

Brenda: At the brickyard – Metropolitan Brick in Canton.

Morty: I saw her arrive in a load of clay that was dumped on the other side of the yard. We got cast in the same lot – these were specially-made bricks for this job. But to think that we wound up being placed next to each other in the same course of bricks in the same building! I used to call it fate that Brenda and I were brought together, but now I know that it was by the grace of God.

Jon: So you have had an experience of God’s grace, Morty?

Morty: Being part of a church for this long, Jon, I’ve learned that God has a role in everything.

Brenda: Believe me, Jon, Morty’s not the same brick I knew on the pallet. Since we’ve been here, he’s become more sensitive, more aware that he’s part of something much bigger than himself.

Jon: Actually, you both are part of something much bigger than yourselves, not only spiritually, but in a physical sense, too. Let me ask you, what has it meant to you to be part of a church building?

Brenda: Jon, some of my best friends are now chimneys, shopping malls, driveways, loading docks. I don’t mean this to sound like bragging, but being part of a church, I think, is the most meaningful thing I could be.

Morty: Me, too. People can live without most of the stuff sold in the brick-front stores. People can survive without fancy-looking patios or barbecue pits. But a church – well, a church helps people get in touch with the God who guides all of life.

Jon: Do you really think a building can make that much of a difference in experiencing God?

Morty: Think what a building signifies, Jon. A church building suggests permanence, endurance. It suggests a refuge from the troubles of the world that try to beat us down. The church protects us. You know, they call it a sanctuary because it is a place of “*sanctus*,” of holiness. Here’s we’re reminded that life is holy; life is a gift from God to be celebrated. We shouldn’t take life for granted. We shouldn’t abuse our lives or the lives of others.

Brenda: Again, not to brag, Jon, but being part of this church, I’ve seen how important this place has been for hundreds and hundreds of people. The weekly worship services on Sunday mornings – we’ve had literally thousands of services, haven’t we, Morty?

Morty: Yup.

- Brenda: Jon, I know that some people outside the church think that all those Sunday morning services must be just the same old ritual week after week after week. But that's not what I see in the faces of the people who leave this sanctuary. I see people whose loneliness is blown away by Sunday services. I see people who come in quiet desperation, bearing a burden that is about ready to squash them, and when they leave, they leave knowing that the load is being shared – on their shoulders and on God's shoulders. I see people searching for meaning, and when they come in and hear that God loves them unconditionally, and that when this life ends, eternal life begins – when they hear the word of God which is for *them*, they get the perspective they've been seeking. They're not living only for themselves anymore – they're living to serve God.
- Jon: *I've* always thought that weekly worship is essential to living a meaningful life, and I'm glad to hear you express it so beautifully, Brenda. Now let me ask you both: any interesting stories? Any secrets? I imagine that you've seen a lot happen in this room.
- Morty: Ummm... There might be some people who don't know that near the vestibule coat racks there's a secret stairway that leads to the hidden balcony.
- Brenda: I don't know any secrets, Jon, but as far as interesting stories... Morty, do you remember when we were being built, and a lumber strike delayed installation of the roof? We brick walls were completed, but there was nothing over our heads. One church member driving by saw the building here down the hill in a bank of fog, and said that we looked like Noah's Ark floating in the mist. And then there was that wedding where the bride started to cry, and then all the bridesmaids, and then the groom and one of his groomsmen, and then the parents, and probably half of the invited guests. What a weepy crowd – except for the father of the bride. He just sat there the whole time with the biggest grin on his face!
- Jon: Sounds like you two experience a lot of happy times in here, but I imagine that the funerals must be pretty sad.
- Morty: Well, yes *and no*. We're always saddened when this church loses one of its own. But the very fact that we are honoring that death with a worship service in this building – *that* is an affirmation of our faith: that the person's life is worthy of celebrating because life continues in God's eternal kingdom. I think that funerals are one of the most important reasons Brenda and I and all the others have been brought together to make this building.
- Jon: You know, what you just said raises a question in my mind: Do you ever wish you were some *other* part of the building? Don't take this the wrong way, but you are just two out of hundreds and thousands of bricks. Do you ever wish you were a window, maybe, or a door, or beam or chandelier?
- Brenda: Not for a minute, Jon. Scripture says "I chose a valuable stone, which I am placing as the cornerstone in [the holy place,]" and also it says that "the stone that the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all." We don't have any feelings of inferiority, Jon. The builders chose us to be here to hold down the wall below us and to hold up the wall above us. We have a unique place in this building. Without us, it wouldn't be complete.
- Morty: We're kind of like one of those sermon illustrations we've heard over the years from you and Jim Walker and the other ministers and all of those great lay preachers, too. God has called each of your members to serve the Kingdom in a special way – isn't that what you believe?
- Jon: I certainly do.

- Morty: In the process of serving God's kingdom, some people may get a lot of attention by being elders or choir members or liturgists or guest preachers. Others don't get as much attention, but what they're doing is important just the same. They may pick up someone who doesn't drive so they can get to church. They may make a phone call to someone they've not seen in church in a while and simply ask, "How are you? What's going on?" They may include another church member in their prayers. Do they get a lot of attention? No. But is what they do important? Without question! So what's more important: a brick in the front wall or a brick hidden behind a radiator? A window or a wall? A square of carpet or a square of roofing tile? A well-known deacon or a shy new member? There is no difference – we're all important simply because we are precious to God.
- Brenda: Jon, there's just one other thing I need to say, because some people misunderstand what we bricks are doing. Some people complain that when bricks are built up into a church building, we end up cutting you off and isolating you from the outside world, creating a self-centered, naïve world for the worshipers inside. Nothing could be further from the truth. When we bricks are made into a church building, we're a structure that proclaims God's love for all the world to see. People can look upon this building and know that those inside are trying their best to spread God's love throughout the world.
- Morty: People aren't perfect; they don't always succeed in showing God's love, just like we construction materials don't always succeed in keeping the wind and rain outside. But you people and we bricks all try our best, and that's what God asks of us.
- Jon: What's ahead for you two?
- Brenda: God willing, we're going to be here a long time.
- Morty: I think we have a happy future in store, judging from the joy I hear as people walk past me. As your members have found spiritual fulfillment here, now they're asking friends, neighbors, family members to come here with them to experience for themselves the joy that comes from being part of this church.
- Jon: Any closing words to me or to the people of this church?
- Morty: The next time you look at the walls of this sanctuary, don't take us for granted. And don't take each other for granted, either.
- Brenda: That's right. Remember that the love of God which we know in Jesus Christ – that love is the mortar which holds you all together.
- Morty: Speaking of mortar, it's time for us to get back to our places in the wall before anyone misses us.
- Brenda: We'll look forward to seeing you for the next anniversary.
- Jon: And we thank you for joining us today.