

You know, every time I read this Gospel from Luke, the one where the disciples are agog, admiring the Temple stones, I remember being in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome with Bob, his sister Sue, and our brother-in-law Mike. The beauty and majesty were simply overwhelming. I was just like the disciples, except I was taking pictures with my phone of absolutely everything!

It may as well have been me saying, *"Look, Jesus. Look at these beautiful stones. Look at this incredible building."* And this day, Jesus, bless his heart, (as they say in the South), basically says, *"Guys, enjoy it while it lasts, because someday it is all coming down."* It is not exactly the architectural tour they were prepared for.

But Jesus is not trying to be dramatic. He is inviting them, and inviting us, to look deeper. The building may be solid and impressive and awe inspiring, but that is not the point. What matters is the community being shaped inside those walls. What matters is the mission unfolding between those stones. What matters is the transformation that happens in the hearts of the people gathered there.

If there is any congregation that understands talking about a building, it is us. We talk about this place a lot, especially at Vestry meetings and in the office. The roof. The boiler. The stonework. The paint. The "this needs attention" and the "that needs fixing." And, lest we forget, of course, THE ELEVATOR! Sometimes it feels like we are running a small municipality rather than a church.

And, I guess, it's OK to admit to that, because this building holds so much. It holds our worship and our ministries. It holds our laughter, our prayers, our grief and our celebrations. It holds the stories of people who came long before us and the hopes of those who are just beginning to find their place here.

But here is what I think Jesus is reminding the disciples. Even when we talk about the building, we are not really talking about the building. We are talking about who we are and who we are becoming. We are talking about the kind of community God is shaping inside these walls and how that formation leads us beyond these walls into the world God loves.

During our Brown Bag Bible Study of 2 Corinthians this week a phrase popped off the page for me. Paul is pointing out something important to the community about their generosity. He says, *"You were the first not only to **do** something but even to **desire** to do something."* I love that. Duty and desire. Action and longing. Responsibility and joy. Paul knows these are not opposites. They need each other.

Duty calls to our sense of responsibility. It pays the bills, tends to the leaky pipes, and keeps the lights on. Desire is what makes all of that feel like joy rather than obligation. Desire imagines the

next two, four, and ten years of ministry. Desire says, *"I want to be part of this."* Duty says, *"We need to take care of this place."* Desire says, *"I love what God is doing here."*

The building matters because what happens inside it matters. People walk through our doors for all kinds of reasons. Maybe the stained glass caught their eye. Maybe they came for the music. Maybe they came to the Farmer's Market and felt welcomed by a member of the church. Maybe a friend invited them. Maybe something deep in their spirit nudged them here. The building may be what first catches someone's attention. But the building is not what holds people here. Something else does.

Here's something to consider today:

What holds you here? What makes you stay? What makes you want to grow, to give, to carry something from this place back into the world?

Take a moment and write it on one of the leaves you can place on the tree in the St. Margaret's Guild Room. Your answers are the heartbeat of this congregation. People do not stay in a church because the roof does not leak, although that certainly helps. They stay because they find welcome and community and God's presence in a way that feels real.

Because of that, taking care of the building is not a distraction from ministry. It is ministry. Scripture is full of stories of God restoring things. God restores relationships, restores hope, restores communities, restores creation itself. When we restore this building, not as some weighty artifact, but as a home for worship and learning and service and healing, we are joining in that same work. I think there is something profoundly faithful about looking at a crack or a broken hinge and saying, *"We can fix this."* Not because we seek perfection, but because we believe this place has a future. Because we believe God is not finished with us here at ECOTA yet.

If we only ever give out of duty, it eventually wears us down. Stewardship becomes just another task. But, in turn, if we only ever give out of desire, without the grounding and rhythm of duty, nothing gets done. Ministries cannot run on enthusiasm alone. We need both. Duty, which says, *"Let us take care of the building."* And desire, which says, *"Let us imagine what is possible inside it."* Duty, which says, *"Let us get the pledge cards in."* And desire, which says, *"Let us shape the future of this church."* Duty keeps us steady. Desire keeps us joyful.

Jesus is not saying the Temple does not matter when he tells the disciples it will one day fall. He is saying that the stones themselves are not the ultimate thing. What God builds in us, in our lives and in our shared ministry, that's what endures. The building is the vessel. We are the body. And the Holy Spirit gives us the inspiration that fills it all.

All of this matters because, you may have noticed, new people come through our doors practically every week. Some notice the architecture. Some notice the music. Many are touched by the

warmth of the welcome you give them. And something in them says, *"Maybe I belong here."* The building might be the doorway. But you, your kindness, your faithfulness and your openness, are the reason people stay.

So, as we enter our stewardship season, I want to place these questions gently in your hands. Not "What needs fixing?" but **"What do you desire for this church?" What is God doing here that you want to be part of? What future is God calling us into?**

Duty will keep things running. Desire will keep us growing. Duty maintains the building. Desire expands the mission. Duty pays the bills. Desire pays attention to what God is stirring in our hearts.

Our campaign theme says it beautifully. *Connection. Connecting to our Faith. Connecting to our Community. Connecting to our Church Family.* Each gift we offer, financial or otherwise, really is a thread woven into the fabric of our shared life in Christ. We are many, yet we are one body. We are individuals with different stories, yet God keeps drawing us together. That is the heart of stewardship. That is the heart of our life here at Atonement.

As you consider your pledge this year, I invite you to listen for both voices. The steady voice of duty that says, *"This is my church. This is my responsibility."* And the joyful voice of desire that whispers, *"I love this place. I want to be part of what God is doing here."*

People of ECOTA, this place has become home for many of us. It is where we show up as we are. It is where we find familiar faces. And it is where the coffee is, at the very least, hot. As we start this stewardship season, I am not asking you to think only about the boiler or the roof or whatever decided to break this week. Instead, I simply invite you to ask yourself, *"What keeps me here? What makes this place matter to me? What do I hope it continues to be for others?"*

Let those quiet answers guide your giving. Let desire set the tone. Let duty come along just to help with the logistics. I am grateful for this community. I am grateful for the steady and ordinary ways God works through us. And I trust that together, step by step, we will take good care of this place, and of each other, so we can continue the mission that happens far beyond its walls.

Amen.