

A Sermon Preached July 19, 2009
By the Rev. Frances A. Hills, Rector
St. James Episcopal Church Great Barrington, MA
"On the Road" at Crissey Farm
Proper 11 B

I don't know how many times I've driven by St. James since the wall collapsed last year. I don't know how many times I've parked the car and walked up to the building, around the building...

Prayerfully, thoughtfully wondering...

What will happen to this place?

What will happen to us, the people of St. James?

What does the future hold?

And I've also gazed up at St. James' clock tower and thought of that famous speech of Joshua after they crossed into the Promised Land and built a stone monument, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' ..."

What do these stones mean?

A couple of weeks ago we got the official report back from our engineering firm. We shared it with the congregation last Sunday. We also wanted to let the wider community know what we're dealing with as a congregation. So last Thursday, St. James hosted a public meeting at Berkshire Community College-South County Center, right across Main St. from the church building. Forty or so came to the meeting, and about two-thirds of us were parishioners. We did an expanded form of the report we gave here last week.

After the meeting, I noticed several walked across the street to St. James, and others stood on the sidewalk and just looked across to the church. No doubt they were asking similar questions to mine and wondering similar things...

What will happen to this building?

What will happen to our congregation?

What does the future hold?

What *do* these stones mean...

To me personally?

To the congregation?

To the Town of Great Barrington?

To the Diocese of Western Massachusetts?

In her sermon at the closing Eucharist of General Convention, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori spoke of "The blessings of leanness." She said, "People get creative wandering in the wilderness. They get creative when they don't have great structures behind them. They get creative when they don't have big fat bank accounts." She was referring to the Episcopal Church in general, but it felt like she was speaking directly to us at St. James. God knows we've gotten creative, and God knows we'll need more of that gift as we move into the future!

I must admit it's not every day that I'm actually thankful for the words attributed to St. Paul in the Bible. However, today's words from the Letter to the Ephesians, although they address a very different situation, are balm to the ears. They remind us of the SOURCE of the creativity and strength we've received and continue to need. The SOURCE is the cross of Jesus. Ephesians tells us that through the cross, Jesus has brought together both God's Chosen People . . . the ones who were "near" *and* those who did *not* worship the God of Israel... the ones who were "far off". By Jesus' death and resurrection, the "far off" and the "near" miraculously come together and become the Church. They share Jesus' "peace". Paul says Jesus has taken the wall, the hostility, that stood between these groups and broken it down. He's torn down a wall in order to create a new, united humanity, reconciled to God.

It's like the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which was the theme of this year's General Convention. It means, "I in You and You in Me." The Chosen (the "near") and the Pagans (the "far off") are united in Christ as the Church. *Ubuntu*. So the people with all their different backgrounds and points of view (Paul says) "are *all* members of the

household of God **built** upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the **cornerstone**.”

So no matter what our situation at St. James, we can just relax. No matter what we decide we should do about the building; no matter what time, talent, treasure and energy; no matter what infusions of creativity it takes to get to God’s preferred future for us: We’re standing on the solid foundation of **those who have gone before**...united together in Christ. **Ultimately *our solid ground is Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.***

It is in Jesus’ masonry—not the bricks and mortar—that the whole structure of the church is joined together. **It is in Jesus’ grace**—not in all our hard work—that we grow into a holy temple. **It is in Jesus’ Spirit**—not in a particular building—that we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. **It is in us**, God’s people, that God dwells.

It is we who are God’s holy temple. So, I hope we will take our companionship with one another very seriously...God dwells in and among us! I in you and you in me. *Ubuntu*. Together as Christ’s body we will receive the creativity God gives us. We will entrust ourselves to God to show us the future God wants for us, and to answer those questions we ask as we gaze up at the building. Christ is indeed the cornerstone, solid and secure, and we are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. I in You and You in Me. *Ubuntu*. Amen.