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Scripture: Luke 2:41-52, Ephesians 2:19-22

Luke 2:41-52: *Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.*

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So, he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

Ephesians: 2:19-22: *That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.*

The story is told that a man died and went to Heaven. He was met at the pearly gates by the apostle Peter who led him down the golden streets. They went past mansion after beautiful mansion until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a shack.

The man asked Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions that he could live in.

Peter replied, "I did the best I could with the money you sent us."

It's that time of year again. Yes, it's stewardship time—that time of year when you are asked to support your church. You will learn about the upcoming budget—that paper filled with items that need to be paid for and the numbers that tell you about how much those items will cost. For many people, this is not the most popular subject to address when it comes to church; but let's face it—the reality is that it costs money to run a church.

I think a good place to start our reflections on this topic is to ask ourselves, what is the church? Is it a building? In the early parts of the Old Testament they didn't meet in a building. We find that during that period of time when the Israelites were in transient circumstances, they worshiped in a tabernacle—a portable tent-like structure.

Later, when they were settled under King Solomon, they built a temple in Jerusalem. It was a permanent, practical and elaborate structure. You can read about the details of the temple in 2 Chronicles. The temple was said to have a great quantity of gold, silver, bronze, and other

precious metals. The temple consisted of several layer, with the Most Holy Place housing the Ark of the Covenant in the center.

If the same temple were to be built today, the cost of the gold and silver alone used in Solomon's Temple was worth \$216,603,576,000. This does not include all the precious metals, bronze, iron, ivory, or cedar wood used in the temple. Now, Solomon did not pay for all this out of his own pocket. Many people contributed time and resources to build it.

When the temple was finished, we read in 1 Kings chapter 8 about the dedication of the temple where it was said that God's presence would be in the temple. That's why the temple was so elaborate. They built it to be God's home. They believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the one and only place on earth where God could be properly worshipped.

The temple was believed to be literally the *House of God*. Nobody could enter except the priests who were regarded as God's personal attendants; and even they could not enter the Holy of Holies, except the High Priest on a particular day. The common people remained outside in the courts where they sacrificed their sheep and oxen according to the prescribed rituals.

Every male Jew of twelve years and older was expected to go up to Jerusalem to meet God at least three times a year. It's no surprise then that Jesus, even as a child, would go to the temple. Later synagogues were built in various locations to make it more convenient for worship. Jesus went to many of these synagogues, to teach from God's Word.

When we get to the New Testament, the conversation about church changes. Jesus began teaching that he was the **living temple**, the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God with humanity. When Jesus hung on the cross, having completed his life's work, the curtain of the temple tore from top to bottom, exposing the Holy of Holies to the people. This was a spectacular sign from God that the old temple worship was finished forever. God could be worshipped everywhere and at any time.

So, what became of the church at this point? Well, a word emerges that describes the church of the New Testament—*ekklesia*, which is a Greek word that gets interpreted as church, but it's not the church building. According to Strong's concordance, it is a body of believers whom God calls out from the world and into His eternal kingdom. In other words, the church is not a building—it's the people called out by God to carry his presence through their daily lives. The church is you and I.

That does not mean that a place to meet was no longer needed. While the New Testament does not mention the first Christians meeting in specially built facilities, it does speak of people assembling for worship; and we may assume they met somewhere regularly. Later, the Apostle Paul mentions at least three times that people—the church—were meeting in houses. But the emphasis is not on the building, because the church was the believers in Christ.

It wasn't until much later when people started building special buildings used for worshipping God. The earliest known church building is the Dura-Europos church, which was converted from a regular house around 233-256AD. Much later, the early Brethren began meeting in homes and later built simple meeting houses. Eventually, like Christians all over the country, we started building large facilities like ours. But remember, we learn from the scriptures that the church really is not the building—it is the believers who meet in them.

The Ephesians text we heard this morning says it so eloquently, "Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home." We are the church. We are where God makes his home.

A question that might come to mind at this point is, do we really need buildings for Christians to meet in if the people are the church? Quite frankly, I believe the evidence points to the need for our buildings for worship. The fact is that members who move away from a church generally end up ceasing to worship altogether.

Brian Kingslake, author of *Out of this World. Lay-bys on the Road to Heaven*, wrote in an article titled “Do We Need Church Buildings”: The fact that we discipline ourselves to attend services in a certain building at a definite hour and take part in certain ritual which has evolved during the ages can help to preserve and protect our spiritual consciousness. To depend entirely on one’s own resources to maintain one’s spiritual vitality is beyond the capacity of most of us. Structure can get in the way, but without any structure there is a tendency for our thoughts to dissipate and degenerate into trivia and superficial or sentimental nothingness. We need to get together with our friends from time to time, to “fill our tanks at the filling station” so to speak and to recharge our flat batteries.

Our church building provides a place for this to happen. I’ve heard it said of late that this building is becoming a money pit with all the repairs that need to be done. Well, let’s face it—this is an old building and it’s going to need some repairs. But think about all that has happened over the years because this building exists.

Oh, if only these walls could talk, imagine the stories they would tell of people finding Christ and letting them into their hearts for the first time, stories of spirit-filled worship, children memorizing scriptures, choirs singing or playing bells and making the congregation’s hearts soar to God, meetings for planning ways to reach out to our community, Bible studies providing a quiet place to come and pray, love feast, bonding through laughter and games, sharing of testimonies and all of this happens within these walls. Bt the Spirit of God goes with us then when we leave.

This place is so much more than a building and we need to take care of it—both the church building and the church who we are. And one of the ways we care for these is through our stewardship our financial support, our giving of our time, and sharing our talents.

I wanted to try to come up with a way to present a visual for this. My thinking was to take the numbers off the page of our budget and create an illustration. I did come up with something I hope will be helpful in making this personal for us. The first slide in the PowerPoint is a picture of our lovely building, which we need to take care of so that we have a place to worship, nurture and grow our faith, create and carry out ministries to help others meet Jesus.

The next slide shows various needs of the building, our ministries and those things that help us learn and grow our faith. Notice that on this slide they are all outside the building.

The next slides show items moving into the church until eventually they are all in the church. The movement into the building represents our support of these things through the giving of our finances, time and talents. The final slide emphasizes that we are actually the living church who meets in this place, working together to build God’s kingdom.

I created a poster similar to this PowerPoint. Over the next few weeks you will have the opportunity to make a pledge to support not only what is needed to update and keep this building functional, but also to support the church—which we are, you and I—and the ministries God calls us to do. As pledges come into the church, I will be moving the items on the outside of the church to the inside of the church. I encourage you to prayerfully consider making a pledge as you are able.

We are the church—the church that houses God within us, the living church called to help build God’s kingdom. So, let’s be the church! Amen.