

“IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, January 10, 2016

Today, we celebrate a beautiful mess—our construction project at the east end of our narthex and sanctuary. It has been a long time coming. And it has been tough for us to envision what it’s going to be like. Yet now with the walls in place, it’s all becoming real.

From the outside it looks smaller than I imagined. But I know that appearances can be deceiving, especially when looking from the outside in. What we can anticipate when it’s all done is a room with enough space to accomplish our purposes—offering a haven for families with young children on Sunday mornings and providing a gathering spot for family participants in special services held in our sanctuary—everything from weddings to funerals. Hopefully, brides using a space also dedicated to Sunday nursery care won’t feel too pressured by the sight of baby equipment!

One of the things I like most about the new room is the amount of natural lighting it will enjoy. It is no idle boast to call it “A Room with a View.” Have you notice the three large windows facing Goddard Road? Also, on the opposite side facing my office there is a commanding bay window. However, that’s not all. On the east wall, brick and block will be cut away to create just the right space to re-install the historic stained glass window that is being removed from the narthex to create a doorway to our new addition. By inserting the stained glass window in the east wall of our new construction we will be integrating old and new, making it feel as if our new room has always been here.

I suspect the day will quickly arrive when we can’t conceive as to how we ever lived without the addition, particularly with the new lavatory in place. Similarly, the new ramp coming up along the east side of our building is going to be a boon to folks who don’t navigate steps well. Family members will be able to drop them off at the curb where the ramp to the walk starts. You can already see the outline of the ramp and the walk. Our handsome tree, which has been preserved under the construction plan, will shade the walk and ramp. I envision our groundskeeper Harold Fick doing wonderful things to make the area another beautiful garden spot, adding to the view from the bay window.

I think we are going to be proud of the result. At a time when other churches are merging or closing and giving up the ghost, we are investing in our present and future. Indeed, with our construction project we are making a bold statement about our own commitment to ensuring that our church is properly equipped for ministry for another

generation. Our ancestors in faith who first built a church on these premises 134 years ago and then erected our present church building 68 years ago would be proud of us. With this building addition we are living up to their legacy.

Our trustees, Building and Grounds Committee, and Building Our Future Team have jointly decided that we can also honor our ancestors' legacy in another way. Taking a page from their playbook (or should I say their workbook?) they have decided that we can be the best stewards of church resources and reduce the cost of the whole project if we tap talents of church members to help finish our "Room with View." While some things are better left to our building contractor J.S. Vig and those he retains, there are folks in our midst who may be ready and willing volunteer their labor for final carpentry and painting projects. This is exactly what was done in finishing our present sanctuary more than a half century ago—and we still admire the results.

As has been noted many times before, the new building addition is not going to alter our sanctuary space. However, it will bring changes to our narthex. The present east side door will be sealed off, creating an additional storage closet. Meanwhile, our collection bins for food that have found a place in the narthex will have to be relocated elsewhere so that there is unimpeded access to our new "family room." Beautifully and most fittingly marking the entrance to our "Room with a View" will be our ornamental "Tree of Faith" installed on the south narthex wall where the facsimile for the tree is already mounted. The people we love, remember, and cherish through the Tree of Faith will symbolically be gatekeepers and guardians of the new family room.

Of course, I know that just as a house is not a home, a building—even a long-awaited beautiful addition—does not a church make. A church is people. And not just any people but, rather, those committed to being the living body of Jesus Christ with the same heart and mind that he had towards God and others. A real church is ready to be the hands and feet for the work of Jesus Christ. But a building consecrated to God's purposes matters too and is worthy of respect, honor, and appreciation.

Like every observant Jew, Jesus loved the Great Temple of Jerusalem, which was actually Israel's second temple, built to replace the original edifice constructed by King Solomon only to be destroyed during a Babylonian invasion and conquest. Mary and Joseph took him there for special blessing when he was still a baby. (*Luke 2:21-40*) That was shortly before they had to flee to Egypt in order to save Jesus from the evil and murderous King Herod who wanted all Jewish boys killed lest one of them usurp his

throne. It was at the Temple that the Prophetess Anna identified Jesus as the boy who would grow up to become the savior of Israel--indeed, the savior of the world.

Later, when Jesus was twelve, he felt so at home in the Great Temple during the Passover Festival that he spent hour upon hour in deep conversation and discussion with the Temple elders. He didn't even notice that his parents, apparently traveling with a large extended family, were leaving the Temple and the City of Jerusalem to head back home to Nazareth. When his parents came back to get him, Jesus was amazed that his parents were perturbed and worried. "Did you not know that I was in my Father's house?" he asked them. (*Luke 2:41-52*)

Only as an adult did Jesus have any issue with the Temple. In a dramatic confrontation he overturned the tables of the pigeon-sellers and money-lenders who did a brisk and lucrative business helping visitors to the Temple secure animals for sacrifice and exchanging their Roman money for sanctified Temple coins that could be added to the coffers without spiritually contaminating the Jews' greater spiritual center. Jesus made clear that it was actually the pigeon sellers and the money traders who were defiling the Temple, making it a "den of robbers." He wanted to restore the Great Temple as a "house of prayer for all nations." (*Mark 11: 12-18; Luke 19:45-47*) At the same time, Jesus could foresee that this was not likely to happen. To the apostles he prophesized that despite the Temple's sumptuous magnificence, not a stone of it all would be left standing in time to come. (*Mark 13:1-2*) Why? Because it was more spiritually corrupted than not, led by men no longer committed to God's righteousness.

Later, when Jesus was arrested, the guards bullying and brutalizing him reported him as saying that while the Great Temple would be destroyed, God would raise up another Temple not made nor corrupted by man within three days. (*Mark 14:58-59*) If the statement as recounted by the guards is even vaguely accurate, it not only appears to be an allusion to Jesus' own bodily resurrection but also a divine prophecy about the birth of the church as a body of his faithful disciples.

Given what had happened with the Great Temple Jesus could have turned cynical about all religious institutions. But he did not. Instead, Jesus understood our need for coming together under one big roof to worship God and to be with one another. He believed and trusted that God would raise up a finer institution that would honor and serve him more completely in the spirit of his own ministry. Furthermore, Jesus had no problem with

beautiful religious buildings like the Great Temple so long as the people worshipping within them stayed faithful to God and his righteous, loving ways.

As Jesus' disciples, there's a responsibility entrusted to us. Amid whatever handsome surroundings we enjoy, we always need to make sure that we remain focused on being real Christians, not just people who meet to socialize on Sunday mornings in a pretty building.

Many churches undertaking building programs find that they gain a new lease on life. People like seeing new things going on and are drawn to communities that are dynamic. Congregation, in response to other people's curiosity about what is happening here, I hope that each of us will encourage those who ask about us to come see for themselves. Just as importantly, we should share with them the good news that the deeper beauty of this place is the faith of our community which, in a very down-to-earth way is committed to being the true servants of Jesus Christ in the world. People need to know that they too can be a part of a beautiful thing for God.

Amid the construction underway for our church, there can be a lot of mud out there, particularly as the ground freezes and thaws. We all need to wipe our feet as we step inside our church from outside. But then what's new? Whether we realize it or not, we've probably been tracking mud in this hallowed place for years—our own spiritual mud! Yet God has always helped us clean it up so that we can lead lives that are kinder, gentler, purer, and more beautiful still.

Keeping that thought, let's just do our best in every sense to be as neat, tidy, and good as we can be, relying on God's grace to help us take care of the rest. **Amen.**