

2 Samuel 7:1-17
July 19, 2009

South Plains

It's The People, Stupid

"It's the people, stupid." That's one way to read the message for us in the dream of the prophet Nathan. You may recall that in the 1992 presidential election a sign was posted with a similar message. Bill Clinton was a long shot candidate for President of the United States. His campaign manager hung a sign in the campaign headquarters that reminded everybody of the main issue in that election. The sign read, "The economy, stupid." Bill Clinton took the message to heart and was elected. That little sign is an reminder of how easily we are distracted from what is most important. King David almost allowed himself to be distracted from what made him King, God's grace and faithfulness.

We can be distracted from what is most important in our lives, if we're not careful. We allow trivial arguments to undermine our marriages. We go broke buying things we don't really need. I will answer my cell phone just because it's ringing and thereby become distracted from the people sitting in front of me; or worse, I may stop paying attention to my driving. The church of Jesus Christ is just as susceptible to these distractions today as King David was in his time.

Consider where King David was in his career when he first had the idea of building a temple to worship

the Lord. The previous King Saul was dead. David had defeated in battle not only Goliath and the Philistines, but also his Hebrew rivals to the throne. He had established himself in Jerusalem, the new capital city of Israel. In some ways this was the perfect time to build a temple to the Lord, a house of God. The temple would be a public thanksgiving for David's success. Even the prophet Nathan thought it was a good idea, at first.

The problem was that God didn't want a temple or a house, at least not yet. God had a perfectly beautiful tabernacle. What God wanted was a people. That's what God was after with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That's why God called Moses and those slaves out of Egypt. And, that was the goal when God made Saul and later David the King of Israel. God wanted a people who would follow him and glorify him by becoming a holy people. That's still the goal. God wants a people who follow the way of Christ more than anything else.

It's amazing how easily we forget the point of God's grace with us. Churches and preachers get sidetracked by wanting to be known as the biggest, or the most influential, or the oldest, or the most beautiful church in the community. Or, we turn all that on its head and we take pride in being the smallest or most exclusive or happiest or most pure congregation. Please don't get me wrong. There's nothing bad about these ambitions when they are directed toward the ultimate goal of a people who glorify God.

David and Israel were walking the tightrope between a kingdom where the power and the glory belonged to God and a kingdom where the power and the glory belong to the earthly king. Kirk Hall and every church building campaign must walk that tightrope between making something that serves the purposes of God and something that satisfies human ambition and pride. Nathan's dream and God's guidance for David can help us negotiate that path successfully.

The lesson for David is that his earthly kingdom cannot translate directly into the kingdom of God. The same is true for the church. South Plains and all the churches in the world do not equal the kingdom of God. The reason for that disconnect is that the church is founded on the promises of God, not on the goals and desires and hard work of human beings. God uses our hard work and the best of our aspirations to build the kingdom. But, the foundation on which we are built is God's promise. And, God's goal, God's promise is a people.

I am reminded of that goal every summer when Vacation Bible School rolls around. There are few of the church's programs that require more work for such a fleeting, ephemeral product than VBS. Yet, it can be so personally satisfying for helpers and students alike. As we made a circle of children and adults and moved around the sanctuary last week, I counted 29 children. Most of them do not come to church here on Sundays.

We will never become a mega-church by producing Vacation Bible School.

But, you know what? Every night we talked about God's love for those children. Every night we shared the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every night the opportunity for learning was there. Every night games and crafts and songs demonstrated the loving fellowship of the church. And, there were smiles on the faces of the children and hugs exchanged and the joy of the Lord was evident in all. People were growing in Christ. People were praising God. People were going home with a vivid picture of what the faithfulness of the first Christians must have looked like. I believe God was making a people for God's own glory.

It's not about us; it's not finally about South Plains Presbyterian Church. It's about God and his people.

King David was tempted to think it was all about him, the handsome shepherd boy, the giant-slayer, the military leader, the singer of psalms, the King. Nathan's dream reminds the King where he came from and how he got to the throne. God says,

I took you from the pasture....

I have been with you wherever you went....

I will make for you a great name....

And I will appoint a place for my people.

From the beginning, all that was accomplished in Israel was God's doing.

God knew that somewhere in the recesses of David's mind was the hope that a glorious temple, a beautiful house of God would be a monument to David. So God says, "Did I ever speak a word... 'Why have you not built me a house...?' (7:7)." God did not want a temple from David. Instead God wanted a people. In order to get that people, God gave David one more gift, a promise that God would never, never, take his love away from David and his descendants.

That's grace, unconditional acceptance and love. God knows that our faith in response to that grace will not be perfect and pure. There will be iniquity and sin. And, so God says, "I will punish.... But I will not take my steadfast love from him (7:14-15)." Just as a footnote to those of you in the class on the Life and Legacy of John Calvin, it is passages like this that led Calvin to the doctrine of predestination.

And, it is passages like this one that have been a caution and a comfort to Christians across the ages. One of the privileges of being part of the church is the opportunity to stand with each other through times of crisis. Some 15 years ago a friend became the caregiver for his wife of many years. Her care entailed constant attention and eventually led to their relocation to a retirement center with nursing facilities. He died this past year with never a complaint. He was absolutely convinced that God never failed to give him the strength and steadfast love he needed. The promise was true.

The letter to the Ephesians re-states that promise in the light of Christ. Chapter one reminds the church that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." Then chapter two points out that instead of Jews and Gentiles, God wants to "create in himself one new humanity in place of the two (2:15)." We get a glimpse of that new humanity in worship and in other times and places. It was on display during the week of Vacation Bible School with Union Grove. A reminder of its power came in an email last Wednesday calling for prayer about a friend in the Tabor Church who suffered a broken leg in a motorcycle accident. One of our visitors last week was a minister colleague from the Church of God. The Church of God comes in a variety of flavors and is unlike any church I had ever heard about. But, I find that because of Christ, my life has been blessed by working with several of its ministers. It's another display of the new humanity with have in Christ Jesus.

There's an old tradition especially evident in Albemarle County. When a family gains a little prominence, it will build a house, sometimes on a hill; sometimes at the end of a shaded lane; sometimes with a great view from the porch; sometimes the house itself is the focal point of a great view. A great house makes a statement: Look at where we are now.

That ambition was certainly part of David's desire to build a house for the Lord. However, it threatened to displace his desire to serve the Lord who anointed a young shepherd boy to be king of Israel. David wanted

to build a house. The Lord promised instead to build the house of David, a line of descendants that would culminate in the birth of a child whose first home was a stable in Bethlehem. He would be the ultimate king of a people known by his name. David's focus was just near-sighted on a temple building.

I don't think God had a problem with a temple. I don't think God has a problem with building churches, even mega-churches. God doesn't even object to our owning big houses. But, God wants more where the church is concerned. God wants a people who live and worship in that building, or who may live and worship elsewhere.

It's the people, not the house God wants. That could be a mantra for every session meeting, for every Sunday School class, for every choir practice and certainly for every pastor. God wants a people, the people of God reflecting God's love and grace to all the world.

God wants you and me.