

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Scriptures: Jeremiah 29:1-7; Revelation 21:1-4, 9-14

As you noticed, there is a line down the middle of our sanctuary this morning dividing it in half. It was put there for the purposes of this sermon. The right side of the sanctuary represents the City of God (put “City of God” sign on lectern). That is the city described in our first scripture lesson: Revelation 21:2—“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” This city has no poverty, no disease, no unemployment, no homelessness, no mean bullies at school, no suffering and no death. The City of God is like the happiest wedding reception you have ever attended, or like winning the NCAA championship—the most joyous celebration you have ever experienced.

The other half of the sanctuary represents the City of Spokane (put “City of Spokane” sign on pulpit). Sometimes the followers of Jesus look forward so much to the City of God they forget the city they are living in right now. In our second scripture lesson Jeremiah warns about that to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. These Jewish exiles are thinking about Jerusalem, which they consider to be the City of God. They are so anxious for God to bring them back to Jerusalem they have no interest in the cities of Babylon where they are now living. But listen to what Jeremiah says to them: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

God is not telling them to forget about the City of God. Later in the same chapter Jeremiah says, “I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place [meaning the Jerusalem]. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” God has a future for us in the new Jerusalem, where death and suffering will be no more and God will wipe every tear from our eyes. One day God will bring us to that glorious city. But until then God is very much concerned about the city where we are living right now.

Now I need our children and youth to come up and help me with the rest of this sermon. I want you to come up front and straddle the line down the middle. One foot should be on one side of the line and one foot on the other. That is how we must live as Christians: one foot in the City of God and one foot in the City of Spokane. On any given day we may do things that lean toward one city or the other. For example when we go to church and worship God are we leaning toward the City of Spokane or the City of God? (Lean toward City of God.) How about when we pick up trash around our school or the place where we work? Are we leaning toward the City of God or the City of Spokane? (Lean toward City of Spokane.) What about when we come to take communion—City of God or the City of Spokane? (Lean toward City of God.) What about when we take food to the Food Bank or when we help people earn enough money to buy food for their families—City of God or the City of Spokane?

On any given day or in any given activity we may lean in one direction or the other, but we have to keep our feet on both sides of the line. We always have one foot in the City of God and one foot in the city where live right now.

But here is where it gets tricky, and exciting. Later in Revelation 21 when the Bible describes the City of God in heaven, it says, “The wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” The twelve apostles were the first followers of

Jesus. When the Bible says that their names are written on the walls of the City of God, it means that all the things that those apostles said and did for people in this world are built into the City of God in heaven. In other words when we serve Jesus in the City of Spokane we are actually building something in the heavenly City of God.

Now I am going to divide you in half. Half of you go stand on the side that represents the City of Spokane, and half on the side that says City of God. In between I will put this box of bricks. I want half of you to build a little wall for the City of Spokane, and the other half to build a little wall in the City of God. Because the truth is that we are building both walls at the same time. When you do something to show God's love to people in the City of Spokane, you are building something special in the City of God.

While they are doing this I want you grown ups to take a pew Bible and look up a Bible verse: I Corinthians 3:11-13 (NT, p. 167). Verse 11 says, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." We cannot build the City of God; only Jesus can do that. We cannot on our own make this world into the place God meant it to be. But when we serve Jesus in this world and in this city, the things we do are incorporated into Jesus' work. Look at verses 12-13: "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, the work of each will become visible, for the Day will disclose it." The "Day" with a capital D means the day when God's kingdom comes, the day when the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city comes. When that heavenly city comes, we will discover that our bricks—the things that we do to show God's love to our families, our classmates, our co-workers, the poor, the people that don't have any friends, the people of need help—all these things are the bricks that have been built into that heavenly city.

But there is one last point. Now let me have all of you children sit down on the steps. Sometimes the things we do here in the City of Spokane don't always work out. Sometimes we build something and eventually it gets torn down (knock down wall). Sometimes we try to do things for others and they don't appreciate it or it doesn't work or it falls down or it just does not turn out right. But do you notice what happens? When we do things to serve Jesus in this city, even if they are torn down or forgotten, they are never torn down or forgotten in the City of God. They are still there—something we can celebrate forever.

That is why it is important that we always keep our feet in both cities. (Have children stand up and straddle the line again.) If we think only about the City of God (have children move both feet to the lectern side), we may forget the people who need our help in the City of Spokane (have children turn their back on the City of Spokane). But if we think only about the City of Spokane (have children move both feet to the pulpit side), we may give up and get discouraged because our efforts never seem to meet all the needs or solve all the problems (have children look sad and discouraged). It is only when we serve Jesus in this city (have each child pick up one of the fallen bricks and hold it while straddling the line), with our eyes on the heavenly city (look over at the sign "City of God"), that we fulfill the purpose for which God put us here.

- Ken Onstot
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