

**WHEN GOD BUILDS THE HOUSE; 2 SAMUEL 7:1-14a, EPHESIANS 2:11-22;
JULY 5, 2015; HOLLOWAY CHAPEL; THOMAS H. YORTY**

David wanted to build God a house. He was the one to do it – a leader of unsurpassed vision and strength: in his youth, he defeated the giant Goliath and defended God’s people; as a young man he was solicited by the people to become the first king of Israel and in doing so united the northern and southern kingdoms – Israel and Judah – so that the wandering, nomadic people of God became a nation.

But when David makes his offer today to the Holy One of Israel to build him a house he is rebuffed; God sees through David’s plan to enhance his own reputation as “the builder of God’s House” and reminds him that it was he, the Almighty, who delivered Goliath into David’s hand; and he, the Sovereign of Israel, who appointed David king; just as it would be he, the Creator God who would *build David* a house – not of cedar or stone; but a house *as in* a nation, *as in* a lineage to continue his progeny, *as in* a name to be remembered by.

So here in Second Samuel we see, perhaps for the first time, David’s vulnerability, that great as he was, there was one greater; that his self-absorbed ambition had to be checked by his trust in a power greater than himself and in truths beyond his own invention.

We are celebrating the nation’s birthday this weekend along this shore, across the bridge and among the fifty states. Two hundred and thirty nine years. The nation’s story represents a stunning swath of history – including the development of North America and the evolution of the modern world.

The story of the American people, like the story of the people of God, has been told by many voices. And like today’s story of David wanting to build God a house and God telling David to leave the house-building up to him, our national story, at its best, is the narrative of something bigger than any single leader or partisan vision working through us to build the nation.

I want to consider with you today this house called the United States of America that is still under construction just as the House of David was under construction throughout the Old Testament and into the time of Jesus who was, himself, of the House and lineage of David; a house that St. Paul continued to construct, called the church, as he planted Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world.

Today’s biblical texts remind us we are part of an ongoing movement that is bigger than any one of us, bigger than past or present leaders; a movement dedicated to principles greater than our problems and that will culminate in God’s good time.

Second Samuel 2 and Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians are helpful lenses through which to consider our own national story because they were written in moments of crisis and transition; when the two divided kingdoms of Israel were formed into a single nation and when Jewish Christians in Ephesus were persuaded by Paul to open their church doors to despised Gentiles.

It is always at times of crisis, transition and re-formation that individuals and groups identify their core principles and values.

America's great statements of faith and purpose have been made at such moments. From the First Charter of Virginia in 1606 to the landmark Supreme Court rulings of ten days ago this is the narrative of a nation under construction – a “house” – to use today's metaphor that Abraham Lincoln also adopted when the country was divided.

What is striking about these American documents is that, like the biblical narrative, they acknowledge that our purpose and destiny is established not by any one person, but always in pursuit of higher ideals and higher ends.

Legislators, jurists, presidents, poets, and philosophers together call us back to the founding vision and principles from which we deviate on occasion but, thankfully, have been able to return to when national and world events challenge and obscure our path.

The house we inhabit in 2015, in need of repair, is still made of solid construction. Before the house was even standing we chose the land – of unimaginable scope and pristine beauty. On a three-masted ship, “The Mayflower,” the size of this room, with as many crew and passengers as people are here today, they came to Plymouth Colony in 1620. They drafted and signed the *Mayflower Compact*, proclaiming, “we covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politick for the glory of God, advancement of the faith, and to bring honor to our king and country.”

Embedded in that document and guiding the governance of their Presbyterian and Congregational churches were the principles of democracy; so when the hand of the king reached too far, the descendants of the Mayflower, on 7/4/1776, in an elegant, sparse hall in Philadelphia signed the Declaration of Independence and said, “these Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States, Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown.”

The house built on Pilgrim land, framed by the Constitution, underwent more construction over the next 90 years. But in 1863, working to free slaves, a new definition of our national family would expand the social, economic, political capacity of our house. Before 15,000 on a battlefield dedicated to the fallen soldiers at Gettysburg Abraham Lincoln reminded us of the task before us, that “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Then, on the Capitol steps, in 1865, in an equally expansive speech, his 2ND Inaugural, Lincoln, once again, used the finest moral/ethical materials to build the nation.

“Neither party,” he said, “expected for the war the magnitude or duration which it has already attained. Both read the same bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged...

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle, for his widow, and his orphan and to achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

It is a stirring and noble history, yet juxtaposed to the current social polarization, Congressional gridlock and impending Presidential campaign that will spend billions of dollars to win an office that is more coveted for its prestige and power than valued for the opportunities it affords to lead and serve, one wonders what kind of national house we are building in 2015.

I raise the question today because we are in the midst of a period of social disruption and political turmoil. There seems to be, granted with many exceptions, a divide as wide as the country itself between east and west coast urban centers and the south and middle of the nation.

This has been the case for some time but is increasingly so today after the Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage and affordable health care. And while the nation was just settling into the news of those sea-change Court decisions there was the abhorrent tragedy in Charleston. That shooting revealed to us that anti-government extremists and white supremacists are surprisingly alive and well in virulent, if small, numbers in the new generation called the millennials; which I, for one, assumed was essentially unburdened by bigotry.

What is of concern is less those pockets of extremists and terrorists, dangerous as they are, than the climate of political and religious speech; that is, the social media radio and television talk shows, campaign rhetoric and even dissenting Supreme Court decisions that rant and blame and encourage, therefore, discord and violence.

The narratives of fear and blame are lucrative business and have made some very wealthy. As for those who claim higher motives for their hate speech than making money one wonders how anyone's ideals could tolerate such ruthless tearing of the social fabric in which we raise our children and seek to ensure a future for all of us, let alone presume to be an example to the world.

It is no surprise that political movements around a living wage, fair housing, affordable health care, functional school systems, and equal treatment by everything from law enforcement officers to admissions committees are banding together against an apparent trend to disenfranchise people of color and same-sex orientation, not to mention women, seniors and those in the lower socio-economic brackets.

Which makes it all the more remarkable that it was from the family members in Charleston whose loved ones were the victims of the young, white racist who, after acknowledging their profound grief, forgave the perpetrator in a face to face confrontation over a video-feed in a courtroom.

One letter to the editor from a women in Los Angeles said, "I may be naïve but it seems to me this unbelievable act of forgiveness is a chance to reframe troubling questions. Those family members believe that hate is wrong. It is an idea that runs through all religions and beliefs and even for the humanist unbeliever. Hate *is* wrong. This is why we are human and have been given choice. Who are these amazing people in Charleston? It is worth finding out."

I wonder if the time isn't right for such a witness to reconciliation; for a radically new effort at building, again, an inclusive, peaceful house.

I admit that I found the forgiveness offered by those church members in Charleston almost unbelievable; which may say more about me and the times we live in than it does about human capacity to forgive.

Indeed, it is nothing less than the joining together of two previous opposites, enemies even, on which St. Paul builds his appeal on to the Ephesians.

“Remember that at one time you were aliens, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near...for he has broken down the *dividing wall*, that is, *the hostility between us*. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

Making a decision to forgive someone who has personally violated you is not a new idea; *it is* a distinctively Christian idea and practice. It was employed by Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address as an olive branch to the South; it was used by Mohandas Gandhi in his confrontation with British authorities; by Martin Luther King, Jr. as he led civil rights marches and was beaten, jailed and spat upon; forgiveness was offered by Pope John Paul II to the man who tried to assassinate him, and the current Pope Francis. Nelson Mandela famously said when he was released from 27 years in prison that he forgave his jailers because he did not want to spend the rest of his life in another kind of prison – a prison of hatred and revenge.

I wonder if the emergence of the spirit of forgiveness in a courtroom in Charleston at one of our lowest moments wasn't a message from those larger forces at work; forces that have already shaped who we are but have been ignored of late.

David Brooks seems to think so; in an article that had the ring of a Pauline epistle he wrote to his conservative friends, “consider putting aside the current climate, *the culture war*, oriented around the sexual revolution...put aside a culture war that has alienated large parts of three generations from any consideration of religion or belief...consider something else; we live in a society in which bonds and commitments are strained and frayed; millions of kids live in stressed households; many communities have suffered loss of social capital; young people grow up in a social and sexual environment rendered barbaric because there are no common norms; adults hunger for meaning and goodness but lack a spiritual vocabulary to think things through.

Social conservatives, says Brooks (and I would add social liberals) could help to reweave the sinews of society. We have the faith, the vocabulary, the history and example of our ancestors to do so. But it would require the willingness to put aside old battles and be reconciled to those we've long thought of and maybe even enjoyed thinking about as our enemies.

The ability to embark on such a path has been demonstrated by people of faith great and small, known and unknown.

Two weeks ago this afternoon, at 5:13pm, our first grandchild was born. Her name is Eliza Bea Yorty. If her life expectancy is to be well over eighty years, which it could be for a middle class, white female, I wonder what this nation and the world will look like when she and her generation welcome the twenty-second century.

Were it not for the humble and brave leaders among God's people and those who, in their time, have shaped the direction of this nation for the better I would be more pessimistic about Eliza's future. But as President Lincoln reminded us at Gettysburg, "It is for us, the living, to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us."

In fact, there is no better time than difficult times to consider what we are about and what we are willing to die for.

This national holiday is a good time to step-back and re-evaluate the house we are building called the United States of America.

What David didn't understand but St. Paul could clearly see was that when we build the house with God – when we build the house according to the principles and values we have inherited – we build a house not of cedar or stone but in the very lives we lead. It is a dwelling, Paul told the Ephesians, God is pleased to inhabit. Amen.