

What a Building Is (and Isn't)

Well once again, what a cool Sunday for our church family. If you've been around our church long, you know that this has been a day that we've had circled on our calendar for quite some time. If you didn't already know, and I think probably just about all of us did, this is our very first Sunday in these facilities. We were given this building (as in, for *free*) back in August of 2018, and we've been working on it for the past year getting it ready for us to be here this morning. And I won't lie to you, there was at least a moment or two this week where I honestly thought that wasn't gonna happen. Where after all that excitement last week about it being our last week ever in Jackson Terminal, we were gonna be like... "...alright, one last Sunday in Jackson Terminal, yeah!" But here we are, the building is done, or at least *mostly* done—done enough—and we're hosting Gatherings in a building that we own. Which is pretty cool for all of us. And before we're done today, I do want to tell you a little bit more about how this building ended up in our hands exactly—because it's a really cool story I think—but suffice it to say for now that I'm excited, we're excited, and we hope you are too. And we're glad that all of you are here with us this morning.

So that being said, what I'd love to do for just a bit today is talk some about *why* we're excited about having a building. Because chances are, it probably *is* for some of the reasons you'd think, and at the same time might *not be* for some of the reasons you'd think. So this morning here's what I want us to do: I want us to discuss what a building truly *is*. Now I'm not trying to go all existential on you—I'm aware that you probably understand the *concept* of a building: it's some walls, some concrete, some flooring, a roof, some plumbing. I think on that level, we *know* what a building is. What I mean is that I want to talk about the *significance* of *having* a building as a *church*. How should we as a *church think* about this building, that we now possess? Now that we have this permanent space to meet in, what does that mean for us, exactly? And here's how we'll frame it up: I want us to talk first about two things a building *isn't*, and then about two things a building *is*. Simple enough, right? So we'll do two ways *not* to think about our building, and two ways *to* think about it.

Now, real quickly before we do that, that *does* mean that this will be a little bit different than what we normally do here on Sundays. Generally speaking, if you're new to our church family, we like to get up here, and work our way through a passage in the bible, try to grasp what it says, and then talk about what that means practically for us. Today

though, rather than doing *that*, we're just gonna let the Scriptures as a whole be our guide as to how we should think about a day like today. So today being the unique and momentous occasion that it is, I figure it was okay to break just a bit from our normal rhythm. Sound good?

So first, let's talk about a couple things that a building *isn't*:

What a building *isn't*: a church.

First, this building is not a church. Those of you who have been around our church for a bit probably knew that's where I was going at some point in this talk. But here's what I mean: as you work your way through the Scriptures, you'll notice that that in the *Old Testament*, there *was* a significant emphasis on buildings and structures as being sort of the *epicenter* for God's activity on the earth. The tent, the tabernacle, the temple...people had certain physical structures they *went to* in order to interact with God in substantial ways.

And many people still think that way about *church buildings* today. I grew up hearing things like "don't run in church," "don't wear hats at church," "don't cuss in church." Which, just to be honest, led my friends and I to form a game to see just how many of those rules we could break. But the belief *behind* things like that is that there is something holy, something sacred about being "in church," and so we need to treat it that way. Now I'm not advocating for cussing in church, or anything like that, but I don't really think that's reflective of how we are to treat this space. We are called to "be holy" *in general* as God's people, but that doesn't really have anything to do with running or not running or hats...and if the goal is to *not* cuss, you shouldn't do it *anywhere*, church building or not. It's not like you get extra "demerits" or something because you did it in church. Because this space isn't sacred, at least not in and of itself.

In fact, as you read through the *New Testament*, what you'll find is that there almost seems to be a dramatic *de-emphasis* on physical buildings and structures as the place where God dwells. You have the people of God meeting in public meeting spaces, open-air amphitheatres, people's homes—it seems like, for God's people *today*, it's not really about the physical location at all anymore. **When it comes to a relationship with God, The *who* now matters a lot less than the *where*.** Does that make sense?

In fact, on several occasions, the New Testament *authors* will employ the *imagery* of a physical structure to show us that the physical structure is *no longer the point*. I'll give you a couple examples. First, look with me at this from 1 Peter 2:

*[4] As **you** [meaning you and I together, *all of us*] come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— [5] you also, like **living stones**, are being **built into a spiritual house** to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

Now, even if you don't quite understand all the metaphors he's using there, you can see how he is illustrating how the physical structure is no longer the point—because in a sense, *God's people* have now *become* the physical structure. *We* have now become the place that God dwells. Do you see that?

Look at another one with me—this is *Ephesians 2*, v 19 and following:

*[19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.***

So again, the point here is that God's *people* have now become the dwelling place of God, such that there is no longer a need for the space itself to be sacred or holy. So all of that to say, this building is not a church. This building is a *building*. It's a place that our church happens to meet, and worship Jesus in, and use for reaching our city—but there is nothing inherently sacred about it. This building was built out of the same materials every other house and place of business and warehouse and bar here in Knoxville was built out of. The only *difference* is that the primary *purpose* of *this* building is to be inhabited by the people of God—the actual place that God himself dwells. But this building is not a church. Secondly...

What a building isn't: a sign that we've "made it."

In church world, and I think in the mind of many church *people*, a church getting a permanent space is a sign that you've really "made it" as a church. You've arrived. You're finally legitimate. You're not amateurs anymore. I've literally had people tell me

that they plan to finally come check things out once we “get our own space.” As if we’re gonna be different then. I always wanted to be like “if you don’t like us now, you’re probably not gonna like us when we have a building.” But that’s just how it works in some people’s minds: we will likely have people show up to our Gatherings *now* who were never interested in attending *before*, simply because in their mind, we’re now legitimate. Because we have a building.

Now, honestly I couldn’t care less how people “out *there*” think about that sort of thing. Right? Because there’s nothing I can do about that. I care way more about how *we* think about it, “in here.” And here’s why: because one of the things that was so ingrained into our church culture from the beginning was that Sundays is something *we do together*. I can still remember—and a handful of you guys probably can too—when we first announced that we were going to start hosting Gatherings at Jackson Terminal. It was such a big deal for our church family, to finally have a place to meet. And what we did on the night we announced it, was that we put out sign-up sheets as people left for our four Gathering volunteer teams. And our pastors basically said “hey just to be clear, when we say “we are going to start having Gatherings here,” we *don’t* mean “we (the staff) are going to host Gatherings for *you guys* (everybody else) to attend. We mean *we* (all of us together) are going to host Gatherings, for our *city* to attend.” And you guys rallied and signed up so that we could do just that.

And to be honest, that mindset has been just so integrated into our church culture from the beginning. Such that today, 80% of City Church members serve in some capacity on Sunday mornings. *80%*. Just for you guys to know, that high of a percentage is almost *unheard of* in church world. And that’s not me tooting my own horn—I get *paid* to be here—that’s me bragging on *you guys*. My point is that **up until this point in our church’s history, Sundays have *always* been something we *all do together***. We show up, we load in, we set up, and then we do our best to host anybody that walks through those doors.

But as I’ve talked to other pastors about this transition to our first permanent space, one thing that many of them have said is that **when a church moves into their first permanent space, it’s easy for it to start feeling less and less like “church is something we all do together.”** Because all of a sudden, it doesn’t take as many people to pull Sundays off. People stop volunteering as much, people stop serving as much, and decide to take a little bit more of a passive “observer” type of a role on Sundays.

Now can I tell you that there are few things that would make me sadder than if that happened to us? Instead, what I would love to happen is that us **having a permanent space simply frees us up to serve in new ways**. I would love for people to think instead, “okay, my efforts aren’t needed on load-in anymore, so let me hop in with City Kids, and help us serve families well.” “Okay, my efforts aren’t needed tearing stuff down anymore, so let me hop in with our hospitality team.” And for *all* of us, since we no longer have to stack chairs at the end of each service (hallelujah, right?), that means we can use that time to seek out new faces and get to know them after each Gathering. Rather than seeing it as “we’ve arrived now,” I’d love it if we would see it as “we’re just getting started.” This isn’t the end, it’s the beginning. Does that make sense?

So those are a couple things that a building *isn’t*. Let’s talk about a couple things that a building *is*. First...

What a building is: a resource.

So a building isn’t sacred, but it is absolutely a *resource*—a *tool* to be used—for the kingdom of God here in Knoxville. First off, it’s a tool for our church family specifically: we get to use it for Gatherings, and for classes, and for equipping our LifeGroup leaders and leaders-in-training, for training people to read the bible and disciple others and live on mission. We now have a building that we can use throughout the week to advance the kingdom of God in our city.

But let me tell you: that’s not even just *limited* to *City Church*—not at all. South Knoxville Baptist will continue to meet here. Another new church getting started, *Commonwealth Church* with Aaron Loy and his team—are getting their start here in our building, and officing out of here with us. We have other people *officing* out of our building—people advancing the kingdom through professions in the technology sector, through clinical counseling. In the future, we’d love to see this building used by campus ministries, by non-profits in our city. However we can use it and whatever we can use it for for kingdom purposes—*that’s* what we want to do.

And that’s because our take is that this isn’t ultimately City Church’s building—it’s *God’s* building. So we want to see it used for the kingdom as best we can. It’s probably not the *niciest* space ever, but it is 46,000 square feet, right on the river, super accessible to get to from nearly everywhere, in an area of our city that is being developed like crazy. So our philosophy is let’s see it used for the kingdom in whatever way we can. If you have ideas for ways we might use it, feel let us know. I’m sure we can’t say yes to everything,

but we'd love to say yes to as many kingdom things as we can pull off. Because that's precisely what a building is: a *resource*, a *tool* to be used for the kingdom.

What a building is: a reminder.

Lastly, I think a building is a *reminder*. Specifically for us, it's a reminder of God's provision, his care and attention for us as a young church family without a ton of money or resources. God showed up and provided for that church family with exactly what we needed. It's a sign that God *has been* with us, and will continue to be with us always.

So there's a somewhat obscure passage in the book of 1 Samuel where Samuel—one of the leaders of the nation of Israel at the time—has just led the Israelites through a season of difficulty and opposition. And while it *was* insanely *difficult*, he also sees God's hands all over it. He sees it also as a season of tremendous help and provision from God himself. And so as he passes through, reflecting on this reality, he sets up this stone—sort of like a monument or a statue—and it says he named this monument “ebenezer.” ~~Some of you are like, “I didn't know that word occurred outside of Christmas stories.”~~ Well it does. The word *ebenezer* actually means “stone of help.” And it says Samuel called it this name—*ebenezer*—as a way of commemorating, as a tangible reminder that, to quote his words, “thus far the Lord has helped us.” What a cool idea, right?

So here's my proposal for us: what if this building became *our Ebenezer*? Now, I could care less if you call it that, right? But think about it: I mean, we would've never anticipated that we'd own a building this early in our young history as a church. And not only that we'd own *any* building, but a building just one mile away from where we *were* meeting already, super accessible from the downtown area, right on the Tennessee River. And on top of that, a building right smack in the middle of an area of our city that is currently *exploding* with a demographic that we as a church are very equipped to reach, and *have been reaching already*, as a church. And on top of all that, the building was *fr-re-ee*. If those things aren't a sign that “thus far the Lord has helped *us*,” I don't know what is. So **what if, every time we drive by this building, or look across the river towards the South Waterfront, or grab a cup of coffee at Honeybee just a block away...what if everytime we thought of this building, we thought to ourselves “this far the Lord has helped us”?**

I don't know about you, but I *need* reminders like that in *my* life. I for one am very prone to forget the ways that has God provided. I am very prone to forget all the times and all

the ways where I didn't think I had enough, and God provided what I needed. I am a *forgetful* person, especially when it comes to the care and provision and grace and mercy of God. So what if this building became a tangible way to fight against all that? What if everytime we saw this building (which is ever-so-conveniently *also* made out of *stone*, like Samuel's ebenezer was), we thought to ourselves: *God is with us. God has helped us. God provides for us. God is good to us.* I'd love for that to become a thing for our church family.

And just in case you doubt the premise behind all that, I wanted to close out this morning by telling you a little bit of the story of how this building came to belong to us. Several years back, when we were just getting started as a church, Jeff (the other pastor at the time) and I got a phone call saying that Dr. Glenn Sullivan, the pastor of South Knoxville Baptist Church at the time, wanted to meet with us. So naturally, we just automatically assumed we had done something wrong. That sounded like a "you've-done-something-wrong" kind of meeting to us. But we agreed to meet, and we came to this building, right up the staircase here to my left, and sat down in what was then Dr. Sullivan's office.

And once we were there, he proceeded to tell us a story about how, when he was in seminary back in 1960, he sat in on a series of lectures about church planting (if you're newer to church, church planting is the strange term that church people use to describe starting new churches). But in 1960, he heard this series of lectures where some guy suggested that if you're going to start a new church, the way you should go about it is to take a group of people (25 of them or so), who were all a part of a healthy church already, and have them uproot their lives, all get new jobs in the new city, and start the church in that way. And Dr. Sullivan said his knee-jerk response to that was "that will never work." But the guy said if you're going to start a church, that's the way you should do it.

Now, any of you who have been around City Church for a while know that that is how we started—in fact, pretty much *precisely* how we started. We had 25 people, who were all a part of a great church in Columbia, SC, uproot their lives, move to Knoxville, get jobs, and begin living as missionaries. And Dr. Sullivan, the pastor at South Knoxville Baptist, had heard through the grapevine that that's how we went about it. And so he wanted to meet us, because in his mind, we were like a real-life unicorn in the wild. And in all his years of ministry, he had never heard of a church going about it that way. And the other reason he wanted to meet with us was that at the time, South Knoxville was dwindling

down attendance-wise, was struggling financially, and so he wanted to talk to us about what it would look like for us to continue their legacy and our legacy, in this building.

My point is that it wouldn't be a stretch at all to say that God has been orchestrating this whole thing since 1960. Nearly *seventy years ago*, he put *those* words in *that* seminary professor's heart, he put Dr. Sullivan there to *hear* that lecture, and orchestrated the details in such a way that in 2016, us and Dr. Sullivan would cross paths here in Knoxville. Does God know what he's doing or what? I don't know about you, but when I hear that story, I think "this far, the Lord has helped us." And listen, because this is so important: **if God started this into motion way back in, he's not gonna bail on us now.** So what if we let this building become an "ebenezer" for us? What if we established it as a place for us to look whenever we doubt who God is, or what he's capable of, or his provision for us? I think all of us have times where we doubt some of those things, and I'd love for this whole thing to be a reminder for us to the contrary. Would that be cool with you guys?

So what we're going to do next is just spend some time celebrating and thanking Jesus for who he is. For his provision for us, both individually and corporately. For us goodness towards us, for his faithfulness towards us. So as we do that, I would invite you to reflect on all of that with us. As we do that, the offering baskets will be coming around—that's just another way to respond in worship to Jesus. If you're new here, we don't want your money—feel free to just pass the baskets on along to the next person. Additionally, the communion tables will be open in the back. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're invited to participate in that as a reminder of God's ultimate act of provision: providing his son Jesus as a ransom, a rescue for our sins. It's through that act, and *only* through that you and I get welcomed into this incredible relationship with the God of the universe.

With all that said, I want to invite you to stand as we pray together.