

Reflection on Building at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Gloucester, Mass

Dedication Sunday
September 25, 2009

Note: Architect Rob Olson, who redesigned the entrance to St. Paul Lutheran Church, Gloucester, Mass., reflects on the first church building where four friends of the paraplegic dug through the roof to get the man to Jesus to be healed, Mark 2:1-12. (You also might say that this was the first elevator!) Olson, a member of University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Mass., redesigned the student-run shelter at UniLu, as well as the narthex and alumni room. He also has done architectural design work for other congregations. He specializes in churches and schools.

By Rob Olson

I'm so happy to be here with you today.

When Anne asked if I would like to speak today I immediately said, "Yes". Then I thought to ask her, "What should I talk about?" "Well," she said, "You could talk about the building."

So what is church building?

If we start at the beginning, it's really hard to say.

Building metaphors abound in the Gospel. But in these metaphors, the poetic of building is vividly paradoxical and contradictory. The poetic of building is as much about destruction as construction, more about spirit than stone, brick and mortar.

But buildings themselves, that is, important buildings like this one, rarely occur and when they do, their meanings are turned upside down.

There is architect, though, in the Gospel: Peter. Don't you just love Peter? He is so faithful, so complicated, so eager, and flawed: so much like us. Peter sees Jesus transfigured, glowing, white, with Ezekiel and Moses on the mountaintop, and his first impulse is to say "let's build a shelter for each of you". He meant a temple, of course, which, in the classical world, sheltered a deity in a sacred place. But as soon as he made his suggestion, everything is suffused in a cloud and God names Jesus His Beloved, and commands "Listen to Him." At that sound, everyone disappears but Jesus and the disciples. There's no need to build. Listen to Him.

But there's another way of building.

In the beginning of Jesus' ministry he is in a house, in Capernaum, preaching. In Mark, the house is a Palestinian house with a roof terrace. This kind of house is masonry with thick walls to perpetuate the cool of the night into the day, and the rooftop terrace that used in the evening that was as much as part of the house as the inner room.

Jesus is inside and there are so many people inside no one else can get in. The walls are thick, the windows are few: outside in the bright light you can't see in or hear through the thick walls. There are even people in the front of the door. Now some people came bringing a paralytic, carried by four men.

Mark is very clear about what happened next:

As they could not get the man to Jesus through the crowd,
They stripped the roof over where Jesus was, and
When they had made an opening they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic lay.

The story makes it clear that:

- The people seeing the difficulty of bringing their friend to Jesus made a decision to go onto the roof terrace, to enter through the roof,
- That this work took some time, and
- That it took place directly over Jesus, who was at the center of the gathering of people, and that Jesus continued to preach as it happened.

Imagine that: digging through a roof of clay and flagging and timber and brush so adeptly and harmlessly.

How could that be done if the people on the roof were not there by consent of the people in the house, who understood this was not an act of vandalism, but one of renovation,
and consented to open up their quiet sanctum in this way, to all their brothers and sisters.

Imagine the light beginning to fill the house unexpectedly as the opening is made, then flooding the house, as the opening is made big enough, and then, this lame brother, appearing in the light, as the men on the roof, contriving a primitive elevator from a stretcher, lowered their friend, on ropes, into the midst of the faithful, to bring him to Jesus.

This is the first church building: a home opened first to Jesus, then to his immediate followers, then to every person, by the consent of the faithful who listened and acted. I believe that you are just like these people in their house, who chose to open their house to everyone, who listened and acted.

I think I speak for all of us – architects and builders – when I say that we are thankful that you entrusted us with your roof.