

“Altar Your Life”
Romans 12:1-2
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 29, 2007

Did you know that the Methodists, back in early 1856, probably erected the first permanent altar in the city of Omaha? Did you know that Father Flanagan is entombed just to the right of the altar of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Boys Town? Did you know that the altar at my home church took a direct hit from the Great Tornado of 1975? And did you know that the altar at St. Augustine Episcopal Church, right here in Elkhorn, used to be a part of what is now Dietz Memorial UMC? It's true. It seems that when Dietz was built, down on South 10th Street sometime back in the late 1880's, it was originally an Episcopal church. That congregation spared no expense when constructing its house of worship, importing glorious stained glass windows from England, installing the best hand-pumped organ in the city at the time, and commissioning a beautiful hand carved altar to adorn the sanctuary. It was a magnificent place. But when the neighborhood changed and all my Italian relatives started moving in just down the street sometime around 1915, those snooty Episcopalians sold their building to the Methodists, moved to the suburbs, and took their altar with them. It is now, as I said, sitting just a few blocks from here, just around the corner from Jerry and Wendy Ladd's house in Skyline Ranches. Bet you didn't know that.

I have always found altars fascinating. They are among the world's most common religious objects. Altars have been found in almost every time and in every culture. Anthropologists define an altar as any structure upon which sacrifices or other offerings are made for religious purposes. We know, of course, that altars were a very important part of biblical religion. The people of Israel built their whole understanding of God, as well as their whole understanding of themselves, around the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem—an altar that Jesus knew very well. But biblical religion did not corner the market on altars. The ancient Greeks built altars in great temples. The Mayas and Aztecs built altars atop huge pyramids. Whoever built Stonehenge built an altar right in the center of that circle of stones. The kivas of Mesa Verde have altars. Altars have been found among the stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe in

southern Africa. And altars remain an important part of Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Shinto religion today. As a matter of fact, if you ever get on *Jeopardy* or if you simply want to impress your friends, Buddhists call an altar a “*butsudan*.” Humans have always built altars as part of their religious practice. Whether it be a simple stack of stones in the desert or an elaborate work of art such as the papal altar of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, altars are important. But have you ever given any thought that you might be called to live your life as an altar?

I have a confession to make. Last week I told you that I had finished my series of sermons for teens and their parents. Over the course of the past five weeks, we have talked about alcohol, money, sex, depression, and one’s life task. It was my hope that families would take what information they heard in worship and then, whether they agreed with it or not, discuss it with one another around the dinner table or wherever that place happens to be where values are formed and decisions are made. Today was that time when we were supposed to move on to something else; to start getting ready for next week’s Vacation Bible School. But as the week went by, I realized that I had left out what just might be the biggest topic that families need to discuss. It is the whole reason for being here. Your pastor, it seems, left out the rather important topic of faith. Please don’t tell the bishop! I am so embarrassed. How could I have forgotten something as basic as that? So if you will permit me to correct my terrible oversight, I would like to remind you of why you and I are here in the first place. This morning I would like to offer you some information and then challenge you—whoever you may be—to make use of that information. Whether you discuss it as a family or not, it is my one great hope that you will hear what I say to you and then act upon it in one way or another. Ready?

Since the Aztecs or the Taoists need not concern us this morning, let’s turn to the place where altars and people of our particular faith tradition first came into play. Biblically speaking, Noah built the first recorded altar. After the waters of the flood receded, Noah got off the ark, stacked one stone on top of another and another, and thanked God for his salvation. Building an altar was an important part of his act of gratitude. If you skip ahead a few chapters, then you will find that Abram built the next

recorded altar. You probably remember that God had called him and his wife, Sarai, to leave their ancestral home and head out to an unknown land. Once they got to the oak of Moreh near Shechem, God had Abram look around and then said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” It was a great promise. In gratitude, Abram and Sarai built an altar. It was also out of gratitude that they built another altar after God established a covenant with them and promised to provide them with descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth. Many years later we read that their grandson Jacob built an altar at the place where he saw a stairway to heaven. It was there, of course, that the promise God first made to his grandparents was reissued to him. Centuries later Moses built an altar out of stone to commemorate the fact that God had helped him and the children of Israel defeat the Amalekites in the wilderness. And beginning in the 20th chapter of Exodus, after Moses and the people arrived at Sinai, God took the initiative and gave the people instructions on how to build a proper altar, an altar that would be a part of the tabernacle, and which would always remind them of God’s constant presence with in their midst. In the books of Genesis and Exodus there are many stories of altars.

My favorite altar story, however, comes at the end of the book of II Samuel. King David, ruler of Israel, ordered a census, which displeased the Lord greatly. So great was God’s displeasure, that a nasty pestilence was sent upon the land. Upon realizing the enormity of his mistake, David repented, and the prophet Gad told him to show the depths of his remorse by building an altar on a certain plot of land owned by a local farmer. The farmer, who witnessed the impending pestilence and wanted it to stop just as much as David, offered to give the land to the king for free. His general opinion seemed to be “Whatever it takes, here; just hurry and stop that thing!” David, however, refused; saying that he could not offer a gift to God that cost him nothing. (Plan on hearing that one during the upcoming stewardship season!) So the king bought the land, built an altar of stone, made an offering, and there encountered God. Israel was saved. Years later, it is said that David’s son Solomon built the temple on that exact sight that the altar sat. Some even say that altar remains today, buried far underneath the Dome of the Rock in the holy city of Jerusalem.

According to what we read in scriptures, altars seem to have been a visible representation of that place where earth and heaven met. Biblical altars were built in those places where humans had an encounter with the divine. They were therefore holy places, not only for the person who had that encounter, but also for anyone who happened upon them. Even years later people would pass by and know that something special had occurred there. It sort of reminds me of when I lived down in Texas. There was a United Methodist camp just outside the town of Bridgeport to which I would go several times a year. It was a great place to be, even though it could get very hot during the summer. Anyone who has ever spent part of a summer at any church camp knows how important those times can be to your spiritual development. Because they were, my friends down in Texas developed a tradition. Youth groups who wanted to remember how they had met God during their week at camp would build altars out of the many stones that nature had strewn everywhere. It was not uncommon to be walking along a path and find a stack of neatly piled stones nearby. When I would see those stones I would give thanks that God had touched those youth, and I would look forward to that time when God would touch me. Remembering those encounters with God, reminding each other of those places where heaven and earth have met, are one of the main reasons that people built altars.

The other reason people built altars, of course, was to sacrifice. Altars, as you know, whether built by the Incas in Peru or by the Jews in Israel, have always been places of sacrifice. Doing so was another way people looked for that encounter with God. Archeologists tell us that when the ancient Americans made sacrifice to their gods, it was always human in nature. Our own faith tradition tells us that when Abraham walked his son Isaac up Mt. Moriah and built an altar, he did so that he might make a similar sacrifice—a sacrifice, fortunately, that our God did not permit him to make. When Elijah built an altar on Mt. Carmel, it was not only to mock the Canaanite god, but also to encounter his own through the offering of a sacrifice. When Solomon built the altar in the midst of the temple court in Jerusalem, it was to be that “official” place of sacrifice, that place where a very real encounter between the people and God could occur. Do you remember when Joseph and Mary went to that temple eight days after Jesus was born, and that when they did they went straight to that altar? They did so to fulfill the law by

offering a sacrifice. It was called the “redemption of the firstborn” and the required sacrifice was a lamb and a turtledove. If the couple was too poor to afford a lamb, as Joseph and Mary were, then two turtledoves were to be offered. And no Hughes, a “partridge in a pear tree” was not included in their offering. Joseph and Mary used the altar in the temple as a way of offering God a sacrifice, and when they did heaven and earth touched.

When you turn to the book of Leviticus, you will find all the whys and all the hows that the ancient Jews were required to come to the altar and make a sacrifice. You may remember that, more often than not it, was for the forgiveness of sin, which was achieved by the offering of grain, the offering of sheep, or even the offering of cattle—something that represented a part of the penitent’s life that would then be placed on the altar as a sign of his or her repentance. Do you also remember that once a year the High Priest would sacrifice an unblemished lamb and pour out its blood on the altar as a symbolic way of atoning for the sins of all the people of Israel? That was an act that should sound familiar to anyone who knows anything about the Christian faith. And do you remember how Paul urged the people at the church at Rome to become a “living sacrifice,” to symbolically offer themselves at the altar. In biblical religion, people understood that the altar was that place to make a sacrifice, and by doing so they encountered, maintained, and renewed their relationship with God. And when that happened heaven and earth would meet.

Throughout biblical history, altars were reminders those moments when people stood before God in special ways. Back then altars were markers of those places where earth and heaven met. That is still true today. Even though what we have in our own sanctuary is just an old cast off from another church with a warped top that has been stained by years of spilt grape juice, it stands here in our sanctuary reminding us of those times when the presence of God has been in our midst in a most special way. It has been at this altar, for example, that you and I have seen the Lord in the breaking of the bread. It has been at this altar that young and old alike have made the important decision to become disciples of Jesus Christ. It has been at this altar that wedding vows have been

exchanged in the presence of God. Brides and grooms promise—Carol and I promised—to love and cherish one another at this place where heaven and earth have so often met. Altars have always been thought of as reminders of that place where heaven’s path and our earthly journey have intersected, as that place where men and women symbolically stand in God’s presence, and as that place where we can offer praise and thanks to the one who has done so much for us. Unfortunately, modern church architecture often does not have a place for an altar. Instead of designing a building around that symbolic place where God meets us, more often than not it is the preacher or the musicians that take center stage. They become the primary focus. And when that happens, it seems to me that something big is lost. Altars are important, and not just architecturally. Theologically those structures help to remind us of one of the basic truths of our faith: that God is always with us.

But once again let me ask you if you have ever thought about the possibility that you were called to live your life as an altar? I am not talking about becoming something made of wood, brick, or stone, but about demonstrating on the outside what has happened on the inside. What if you lived your life in such a way that it became a walking reminder that in you, through your faith in Christ, heaven and earth has touched? I remember hearing the story about the time Mother Teresa came to Memphis. There was a big interfaith rally that packed the Mid-South Coliseum, the old arena where the University of Memphis Tigers used to play basketball. Most of the time that was a pretty rockin’, raucous place—especially when they were winning big and the coach and boosters were all cheating! But as Mother Teresa walked onto the floor of the Coliseum that evening, a holy hush fell over the entire room. It is said that in the midst of that crowd of almost 20,000, you could actually hear her footsteps the floor. Her mere appearance evoked that response from the crowd. Somehow they knew that this tiny woman lived her life in such a way that wherever she went heaven and earth would meet. She lived her life as an altar.¹

¹ Maxie Dunnam, [This Is Christianity](#), Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994, p. 99-100

Now, obviously, none of us are like Mother Teresa. God doesn't need us to be. Her call was distinctively her own. But that should not stop us from understanding that we too are called to live everyday in God's presence, to "altar" our lives. We are called to live our faith in such a way that wherever we go, heaven and earth can meet. Now I am not quite sure what a life like that may look like, but it seems that St. Paul was at least in the ballpark when he offered the following instructions. In his letter to the church at Rome, after spending a great deal of time explaining what God through Christ has done for us, he put his pen to paper and began to describe what we are called to do for God. And it is here that he offered that famous line about becoming a "living sacrifice." Listen to how the translation known as The Message renders what Paul wrote:

*"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your every day ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention upon God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings out the best in you, develops well-formed maturity in you."*²

Would you be willing to do that today? Are you ready to "altar" your life? I have never been good at giving invitations. Even though you will never find an "altar call" mentioned anywhere in the Bible, they have become an accepted part of the landscape in some church circles—especially down south. The first time I ever heard one was when Billy Graham came to preach at the old Aksarben racetrack. As people responded to his invitation and began walking down the aisles of the grandstand, I can still hear him pleading, "If you have come in a bus, it will wait!" Altar calls, in the sense that we know them today, have always seemed to me to be somewhat manipulative. Even though I was expected to offer one for most of my ministry, I have never been comfortable in doing so. But I do believe that God calls us to "altar" our lives. I do believe that God invites each

² Romans 12:1-2, The Message

one of us to respond to the grace that has been offered to each of us through Jesus Christ. After all, without that response, our worship is only performance. Without that response, all our Bible study simply becomes continuing education. Without that response, our mission becomes nothing more than altruism or charity and our evangelism just a way to “fill the pews.” God desires to meet us. Heaven’s path wants to intersect with our earthly journey. We are called each day of our lives to become an altar. And on this day that invitation is offered to you. From what I have learned in the last three years at this church, most of you have reason enough to at least stack up some stones in your backyard and build an altar. But it would be so much better if you would “altar” your lives. As we bow in prayer, perhaps you can decide how you will respond to God’s most gracious invitation.