

Standing here today in this Synagogue, I am reminded that the ancient Israelites were confronted with a similar situation not once, but twice. The temple in Jerusalem was where the people gathered to observe the most holy days of the Jewish calendar. The destruction of the temple was no doubt devastating, and the community that has worshipped here at Adath Israel bear witness to the understanding God is found wherever God's people are gathered in His name. God is not found in a building. We know that don't we? Today we the people of Emmanuel Congregational UCC are gathered together to testify that God is not the building – God is found among God's people.

Some people have been asked; “what did you do to tick God off?” It is not uncommon in the face of tragedy to try to find an explanation for it. Look at 9/11 or the recent events at Virginia Tech. There is not an explanation for the pain and loss. Theologians have spent centuries trying to come up with explanations why God allows bad things to happen to good people. I am not here to discuss that. What I am here to answer is “where is God in all of this?” From the moment I heard about the fire I have experienced that peace that passes all understanding. I simply cannot explain the peace I feel. It really is a sense of shalom. In Hebrew shalom does not mean just peace. It actually means a sense of well being, peace with oneself and the world, and a sense that all is well. That is where God has been for me; God has supplied that peace that I simply cannot explain.

I have also found God in the gathered community that has embraced us and cared for us in unimaginable ways. I experienced the love of God Friday as one of the older women from this synagogue took my hand and said; “Is your hand any different from mine?” I knew in a very tangible way what I have known in my heart for years. We are all sisters and brothers –

we are all from the same family. When God takes a tragedy such as this and uses it to unite his children in such a special way, God is glorified a thousand times more than he could ever be in a beautiful cathedral with the biggest pipe organ and the most beautiful of stained glass windows. We cannot begin to thank the congregation of Adath Israel enough for welcoming us into their sanctuary and providing a temporary home for us. Many of you are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus gives the story about the Samaritan in response to the question; “who is my neighbor?” Adath Israel is more than our neighbor, they are our family.

Just as the ancient Israelites asked themselves how they could ever sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, some of you may be asking the same thing. I have no doubt over the next weeks and months we will sing the same songs that we always have. We may even learn a few new songs. Scripture tells us that God inhabits the praise of God’s people. So when you find yourself wondering where God is, remember that God is found in our praises, our songs, our thanksgivings and in each other.

God was here Thursday night when Father Joel offered us the use of the Episcopal church to gather in for a prayer service. God was present when Pastor Eunice loaned us a chalice and plate for communion, along with hymnals and the offer of choir music from their choral library. I heard Jesus in the messages from my fellow clergy throughout the past few days. Doug Shear, George Middleton; Kathleen Buckley and Shaun Whitehead from St. Lawrence University; my colleagues from the UCC NY conference. I cannot describe the feeling when I heard Don Curry’s message on my cell phone saying “my church is your church.” The New Testament Church has loaned us the use of this keyboard today so we could have music. Our good friend Dave Frary from Phillips Memorial Home offered space for our worship

service today if we needed it. I was so touched by that. At the same time, I did not want anyone to associate our worship with a funeral today. We are here to continue the work of God. The only thing that has changed is the space we gather in. Emmanuel Congregational United Church of Christ did not die in that fire. If anything, we are stronger than we have been in years past. Over the past six months we have experienced new birth. This is just another chapter of that new birth.

During one of our recent workshops, you were asked; “If our congregation did not continue to _____ I would not want to stay. I want to share what your thoughts were on December 10, 2006. You said; “If our congregation did not continue to **change** I would not want to stay. If our congregation did not continue to be **open and affirming** I would not want to stay. Here is the rest of the list:

If our congregation did not continue to:

Be tolerant

Grow Spiritually

Love

Take risks

Work together

Discern God’s will

Welcome new people

And this last one is possibly my favorite; “If our congregation did not continue to **laugh** I would not want to stay.

Do you notice anything? Not one of them had to do with the building! And as I read through the list, I am astonished because we have continued to do every one of these things throughout the last few days. Barb Sanford took the opportunity when a reporter stopped by and said he had just moved

to town to invite him to come and worship with us. God's welcome is indeed vast – amen? Even when we may have been unaware, God used this congregation to speak to many people. Saturday morning around 4:00 a.m., I couldn't sleep so I got up to write down some thoughts on my computer. A gentleman that I know from Parishville saw me online and asked what I was doing up that time of night. I could have asked the same, but I know he is an early riser. He said; "I have been thinking about your church, and may want to share with your folks a little later. That's where I met Jesus." He said: "In 1985 at an AA meeting. That's where I met Jesus, he saved me from alcohol that night." Someday soon Larry Page will come and share his story with us. You to know that the seed planted in him that night in our church, has grown and blossomed in ways hard to imagine.

All of this does not negate the fact that we have suffered a huge loss. Many of you were baptized, confirmed and/or married in that building. Many of you have attended funerals for loved ones in our church. Your sorrow is so real and so deep. I do not mean to minimize that, but I am absolutely overwhelmed by the outpouring of love by this community. Mayor Randy Delosh was at our prayer service the other night and led us in prayer. Words cannot express what we feel toward the firemen. I did not have a clue what those long blasts by the horns on the fire trucks meant until I read the account in the paper.

Those men risked their lives trying to save our church and keep the fire from spreading to surrounding buildings. We are so grateful for their heroic efforts. As one of our members said this week; "they are more than volunteers, they are professionals." Many of you know we were going to host the memorial service during the firemen's convention next month. The New Testament Church has welcomed them into their sanctuary and I am so

grateful. I plan on attending and hope many of you show support for them as well in your own way.

Support has also come from other local communities as well as our brothers and sisters from the UCC throughout the state. I want to share a few of the emails we have received and then give you some time if there is anything at all that you would like to share.

(read email)