

Holy Place not Hiding Place

When I first started working in a UU church, as a DRE, I was taking some time with my supervisor to plan our first worship service of the year. I knew that much of my traditional Christian learned church language was not going to fit. I was trying to learn a new language and be sensitive to a new set of cultural norms. At one point I turned to him and said - what do you call the front of the church? He looked at me quizzically and said "The Front Of The Church ????"

We've dropped most of the words that describe parts of the church building - we don't talk about the nave - that would be where you all sit, or the chancel something we now refer to as the front of the church. But we have kept the word sanctuary to describe this whole room. We could call it the meeting room, the worship room, the service room, the gathering room but we don't - we call it the sanctuary

Sanctuary is a place of refuge or safety. The word actually has its roots in the latin word sanctus or holy. The sanctuary, in catholic churches and cathedrals, is actually the area around the altar and sacristy where holy relics might be kept as well as the consecrated communion bread. Up until something like the 1600s the church was also a sanctuary in the sense that a fugitive could find refuge in a church and was immune to arrest.

I like the story that Tina told this morning because it made me think about sanctuary in a different way. In that story the sanctuary was moveable and changeable it was an umbrella. It protected people from the rain and in that sense was a sanctuary - it provided protection. And it also was a tool to build connection and even a bit of community. The shopkeeper that originally handed the umbrella to the young girl could have said bring it back when you are done. And he could have done that not because he was selfish but he could have said bring it back in order that he could keep on sharing it and protecting more people. In that way he would have been providing the sanctuary and it would have sort of centered on him in the way spokes of a wheel center on the axle. Instead he told her that she could have it if she promised to pass the umbrella on to folks who needed. She in turn could have given it to someone and then said just return it to me when you are done, in order for her to keep sharing it with others. And thereby making herself the center. But she did not do that instead she learned from the shopkeeper and passed on the umbrella, the portable sanctuary and said just make sure you share it with the next person who needs it. In that not only were people provided a sanctuary from the rain they also became part of a community.

In the story there came to be a network of interconnected folks who had found protection under that umbrella. In the story the umbrella the sanctuary came to them. And it created connection and a network because the instructions were to pass it on. The umbrella was a sanctuary in that story and so were the connected human beings in that story.

In the middle ages the church sanctuary was a place you went to. This made a lot of sense. In a world where nature was pretty dangerous and countries were often at war having a sanctuary you could go hide and find shelter was important and functional.

Maybe the hiding isn't so necessary anymore.

For some folks this room is not a sanctuary. For some of you It is a great place and you like coming here for Sunday service but your true sanctuary is elsewhere. Your sanctuary is in the out of doors - among trees and brooks, being in nature, watching the seasons change, or it may be in a book or in many books, or it could be in your family, or in creating art. Sanctuary does not need to be all the same for each of you.

I know that This room which is so meaningful for so many is also one of many sanctuaries for the folks of this community. And that is OK I don't think we as a church need to corner the market on sanctuary in the same what the church in the middle ages might have done it.

Parker palmer described sanctuary this way

“Sanctuary is wherever I find safe space to regain my bearings, reclaim my soul, heal my wounds, and return to the world as a wounded healer. It's not merely about finding shelter from the storm: it's about spiritual survival. Today, seeking sanctuary is no more optional for me than church attendance was as a child.” <https://onbeing.org/blog/seeking-sanctuary-in-our-own-sacred-spaces/>

Note that Parker Palmer does not say that sanctuary is for hiding in. It is a safe space to reclaim our souls, heal our wounds. And note that he does not say that we will be made new as if we had never been wounded but rather that we will return to the world as a wounded healer. We return to the world because that is where the work is and the sanctuary gives us a place to rest and re-create ourselves, to restore ourselves so that we can return to the work

Parker goes on to describe how we live in an incredibly violent society and people respond differently to that violence and how to deal with it.

Clearly the past few weeks have shown us how violent the world is. Honestly I don't know if the world is more violent now than it was in the past especially the middle ages. And that comparison is not necessary. The world is more violent than it should be it is more violent than is good for this earth and for us humans.

As Parker says, "We come up against our helplessness, the inability to stop loved ones from dying, or turn our children from paths of self-destruction, or from those we love from breaking our hearts. And we find ourselves asking, 'Is there any source of help beyond my own strength? Is there anything I can trust beyond our power to make it right?'"

That is the question that has been on my heart these past weeks these past 2 years - what can I trust beyond my own power - what can I trust? I have heard others ask this question also.

My answer is sanctuary but not as a hiding place but as a place of community where you can rest if you need to connect with others if you need to a place where you can be welcomed if you in all that you are.

"I'd like to invite you to look inward for a moment. Please find a comfortable position. Feel the floor, the chair you are in. Breathe deeply. Think of a time when you felt a profound sense of welcome. (pause)
Hold that experience in your mind, and consider whether the space you were in or the interaction you had was changed because you were there. What effect did your presence have? Stay present, and consider what it felt like in your body to experience that welcome. What was the effect it had on you? If you've never had an experience like this, or if you can't think of one, imagine what it would feel like. (pause)

Now imagine what it would be like to feel that way—that full and total welcome, that belonging—every time you entered this space. And better yet, imagine what it would be like to know with every fiber of your being that that sense of welcome and belonging was unconditional—that there was nothing about you, no part of you, whether worn on your sleeve or hidden deep inside, that would make you unworthy of welcome, of belonging, of love.

Do you know what I mean when I ask you to imagine being free from the sense that there is something about you that is inherently wrong, or bad, or simply enormously different?" [from a sermon by Alex Kapitan

<http://uuse.org/the-welcoming-congregation-welcome-as-spiritual-practice/#.W8J36C-ZPG6>]

In that we try to welcome all we try to practice radical hospitality and in that we are a sanctuary. Some of us practice this welcoming because we are just friendly folk and some of us practice it because we know that there are so many unwelcoming and unsafe places in the world. We offer that sanctuary here in this room in this gathering, in our coffee hour in our potlucks and soup dinners. We offer this kind of sanctuary in our senior high youth group, jr high youth group and our children's education classes. We offer this kind of sanctuary in our choir. Welcoming all may seem like normal business to us but it is not. This kind of radical sanctuary will and does change the world.

The welcome that we offer people is not simply friendly. It is counter-cultural and it seems like such a little thing and yet it is not.

Perhaps you have heard this story:

One day an old man was walking along the beach. It was low tide, and the sand was littered with thousands of stranded starfish that the water had carried in and then left behind.

The man began walking very carefully so as not to step on any of the beautiful creatures. Since the animals still seemed to be alive, he considered picking some of them up and putting them back in the water, where they could resume their lives.

The man knew the starfish would die if left on the beach's dry sand but he reasoned that he could not possibly help them all, so he chose to do nothing and continued walking.

Soon afterward, the man came upon a small child on the beach who was frantically throwing one starfish after another back into the sea. The old man stopped and asked the child, "What are you doing?"

"I'm saving the starfish," the child replied.

"Why waste your time?... There are so many you can't save them all so what does it matter?" argued the man.

Without hesitation, the child picked up another starfish and tossed the starfish back into the water... "It matters to this one," the child explained.

I am fully aware that the love in this community will not save the whole world, it alone will not change the tide of history. And as hard as that is it is also OK. Our welcome our radical welcome makes us a sanctuary and that matters

In a world without end may this be so.