

A Space for Holiness

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Exodus 25:8

"And have them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them."

When I moved to Cleveland more than twenty years ago, one of the first people I sought out was the Rev. Bill Johnson, who was then serving in the national offices of the UCC downtown.

Bill occupies an important place in the history not only of the UCC but of other denominations as well.

In 1973, he became the first openly LGBTQIA+ person ordained by a mainline Christian church—a courageous step that reflected the United Church of Christ's long commitment to widening the circle of God's welcome.

When Bill and I had lunch together, however, the story that stayed with me wasn't about his ordination. It was about his research on church start-ups.

After the tremendous boom in church construction following the Second World War, many new congregations flourished—but many others disappeared. Bill was asked by the UCC to find out why so many folded.

So he traveled throughout the Southwest and California, interviewing hundreds of people involved in those young congregations and his conclusion surprised me.

The congregations that endured were usually the ones that moved, within a few years, from meeting in homes or rented spaces into buildings dedicated to worship.

People, he discovered, want to *go to church*.

Not simply to gather with other Christians.

Not simply to hear a reading from the Bible or a sermon.

They want to enter a place that looks like church, sounds like church, smells like church, feels like church, and functions like church —a place set apart for God. A place that the poet Philip Larkin called “a serious house on serious earth.” That’s what we do here. We say the word God over and over in a place like this, and nothing is more serious than God.

The building itself doesn't make a congregation faithful, but the space does matter. Matter matters.

That is precisely what God tells Israel in today's reading from Exodus:

"Have them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them."

Notice what God does not say.

God does not say, "Think about me."

God does not say, "Talk about me."

God says, "Build me a sanctuary."

Not because God needs a building but because we do.

We are embodied creatures. We encounter God not only through ideas but through places, sounds, smells, bread and cup, water and oil, stained glass and music, silence and prayer.

Again and again, Scripture reminds us that God meets people somewhere.

At a burning bush.

On a mountain.

At the mouth of a cave.

Beside a river.

In a temple.

In an upper room.

At an empty tomb.

And, most clearly, we believe, in the person of Jesus the Christ.

Our faith has never been simply spiritual. The Christian faith has always been wonderfully, stubbornly physical.

That is why sacred space has mattered throughout Christian history. Not because God is confined there. But because our hearts are often awakened there.

As many of you know, the congregation from which I retired in 2024 is a merged Presbyterian-UCC church in Lyndhurst. There were many important questions we had to decide in order for that merger to happen. One of them was where a future for our merged church might be lived out.

There was no real support for the idea of both congregations leaving their property and starting a new life together in a new place. That might have been a better option in the long run, but it was pretty clear to everyone that we would be going into our future in one of our existing church buildings—a place already shaped by decades of prayer, music, learning, baptism, communion, weddings, funerals, social time, meals, laughter, tears, and hope.

Buildings are never the church. People are the church. But buildings provide homes for people to gather in the hope of building a little more of that beloved community emblazoned on the gallery wall of this space. Church buildings become vessels for memory. They become containers for grace. They hold the stories of generations who sought God before us and encourage those who will seek God after us.

When we talk about church property, we're not simply talking about real estate.

We're talking about creating and preserving a space where holiness can continue to flourish. People come to places like where we are right now anticipating an encounter with reality that will, in some way, be different from the reality of the day-to-day, business-as-usual world in which most of us spend most of our days.

Dorothy Day once said that love in action is far more difficult than love in dreams.

The same is true of holiness. Holiness is not an abstract idea. Holiness is simply love made visible through concrete actions – like Matthew 25 actions.

I was listening to an interview with Barbara Brown Taylor the other day, who was saying that as she grows in years and grace, she finds holiness in more and more places – like hanging laundry on the line and thinking of Tibetan prayer flags or bucketing water to the horse trough so those great vegetarians won't suffer thirst. In her book *An Altar in the World*, Taylor says this:

"I am not in charge of this House [of creation] and never will be. I have no say about who is in and who is out. I do not get to make the rules. Like Job, I was nowhere when God laid the foundations of the earth. I cannot bind the chains of

the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion. I do not even know when the mountain goats give birth, much less the ordinances of the heavens. I am a guest here, charged with serving other guests—even those who present themselves as my enemies. I am allowed to resist them, but as long as I trust in one God who made us all, I cannot act as if they are no kin to me. There is only one House. Human beings will either learn to live in it together or we will not survive to hear its sigh of relief when our numbered days are done.”

This church prides itself on being a Matthew 25 Congregation, and if you recall that list—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the unclothed, and so on—which of them is not locating holiness in the midst of the most ordinary physical activities?

“When you did it to the least of these,” Jesus said, “you did it to me.”

If holiness is to be found anywhere, Jesus is saying, it will not be in the place of the best—the best seats, the best schools, the best zip codes. It will be found in how we treat God’s material world, especially the most vulnerable parts of it.

Holiness can be mysterious and awe-inspiring, to be sure, but more often than not, it’s ordinary.

It is forgiveness practiced.

Justice pursued.

Hospitality extended.

Bread shared.

Songs sung.

Hands held.

Prayers offered.

Love embodied.

Incarnation.

One of the goals of the Celtic pilgrimage last fall was to learn more about the breadth and depth of the religious heritage that our ancestors bequeathed to us in their practice of their Christian faith.

They built beautiful sanctuaries when they could.

And when they could not, they sanctified homes, fields, wells, springs, forests, prisons, and public squares.

They knew that every generation is called to make room in its life for God.

That calling belongs to us now.

And so I wonder where the space for holiness is in your own life.

Perhaps it is here, in this sanctuary.

Perhaps it is a favorite trail through the Metroparks.

Perhaps it is your kitchen table, where family and friends and perhaps even strangers gather.

Or perhaps it is somewhere unexpected.

A hospital room.

A classroom.

Your workplace.

Your own backyard.

Speaking of backyards or front yards, if you haven't lately, I'd encourage you to visit the garden named in honor of Kemp Jaycox just outside the front doors of this sacred space for it, too, is sacred.

It is sacred not only to the memory of Kemp, who loved God's creation passionately and worked for it diligently, but also to the living reality of the living God, who provides for the pollinators who provide for others, including us.

Where there was once lawn, there are now native grasses, Joe Pye weed, purple coneflowers, brown-eyed Susans, butterflies, bees, and maybe even a fawn resting quietly among the native plants from time to time.

The sanctuary inside these walls is holy. So is that wee prairie just beyond them. Both bear witness that when we make room for life, we make room for God.

We continue our worship with hymn number 313, "Lord, Make Us More Holy."