

“Why We Gather: Make Holy Spaces”
Exodus 35: 4-9, 29, 36:3-7

A recent news story caught my attention as it related negatively to what people consider to be sacred space. It is the story of a 12-foot puppet representing a 9-year old Syrian refugee girl by the name of Amal, which means hope in Arabic. Amal is on a 5000-mile journey to raise awareness across Europe about the plight of refugees and the crisis of migration from war-torn countries. But when the puppet arrived in Greece, one of the local municipalities in central Greece, voted to ban Amal from walking through a village that is known for its Greek Orthodox monasteries. According to the New York Times, “The objection raised...was that a puppet depicting Muslim refugee should not be permitted to perform in a space of such importance to Greek Orthodox believers. The local bishop opposed the project for that reason.” Video: <https://youtu.be/lp3zfEiL5cY>.

Unfortunately, this kind of attitude about sacred space in our world is not unique to that one area or to the Christian religion. There are places in the world where only the adherents of the faith of the particular place are allowed. This makes one wonder, what makes a space sacred.

Since ancient times, people have gravitated toward sacred spaces or toward creating them. Experiences of awe and wonder have led people to create spaces that are dedicated for the soul to show up. In our Bible story for today, we read about the Israelites during the time of Moses being invited to contribute to the building of a tabernacle and the response was amazing generosity.

Two chapters prior to this one we hear about the people of Israel making a similar kind of offering, but that time it was to make a golden calf as an idol. It is fascinating to see how the people were longing to create a sacred space for worship, but one was driven by anxiety and fear, while the other was driven by love and openness. One way to look at the difference between the two structures is that one was a closed set structure with a certain image, while the other was a container that created a sacred space. The golden calf would capture and contain the divine because of human anxiety, while the tabernacle would be an open space to encounter the divine.

There is a powerful metaphor here for us about sacred spaces. Truly sacred spaces are not created and maintained out of anxiety and fear. They are to be about openness to the sacred. Being intentional about having a space dedicated for worship and prayer is an important part of our human experience. These spaces don't need to be elaborate or restricted to religious buildings. The invitation is to have the space help us to be open to the sacred, instead of protecting us from whatever we fear.

So the big test of a space for worship for me is that if it invites the soul to show up, especially in community. A couple of weeks ago we talked about our purpose is to share the love of God so that we may be transformed and able to share that love with others. Today, our invitation is to create sacred spaces that help open us up to the presence of

the divine within and around us. Being intentional about the physical space as well as the emotional space is essential for making a sacred space.

Writer and teacher Parker Palmer speaks about our challenge to create soulful spaces. He writes, "In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy round a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood." Here is a video of Palmer speaking about the importance of creating sacred emotional and spiritual spaces of what he calls "circles of trust:" <https://vimeo.com/86363298>

Even sacred spaces can become desecrated by our fears or ways of controlling life. The invitation is to be intentional about the spaces we inhabit or create. What might that look like in your life or in the life of the church?

I know that during the height of the pandemic when we could not gather in person inside the church building, our homes became our sacred spaces for worship. The internet became a vehicle that expanded our views of a sacred space and our ability to create those. I received several pictures of people's home worship spaces or communion elements. One of the things that connected with my spirit the most this past Christmas was when Valerie and Emmeline recorded a song. Here is the video of it: <https://youtu.be/lzaOLAFSjQ>.

What they did was to create a space for us to experience the sacred while naming our pain of not being able to gather. What a gift of grace! Taking an ordinary human experience and opening it to divine grace. I pray that we can always remember the power of being intentional about creating and opening to sacred spaces in our lives. Wherever you find yourself in community, ask if you are creating or experiencing a golden calf kind of space built out of fear or a tabernacle sacred kind of space. Let the space you inhabit reflect the deepest part of who you are and who we are called to be together! Amen.