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Sacred Space: What Makes Space Sacred?

Why is space sacred?

We've looked at different kinds of church buildings through history. We've examined the places where Israel worshiped. We've imagined our own worship spaces and remembered ones from our past. Many of these spaces have achieved the status of "sacred space." It's time to examine what exactly we mean when we say something is sacred.

We begin with our theology of creation and of the incarnation and of the church or assembly. God blessed all the created order, named it good, and further blessed it by becoming one with it through the Incarnation. Our ideas of what makes a space holy will follow from God's actions in making the world holy.

God's creation makes space sacred

Genesis 1 reveals God's evaluation of the work of creation: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31a). We take seriously God's Genesis proclamation of a creation that is good in God's sight. In that sense God makes all spaces sacred. Here we find the sacredness of natural beauty.

The discipline of environment and art for worship is all about created matter and space being used in ways that honor and adore the Trinity and that make Christ known. We seek to make space for an encounter. Space that honors the Trinity honors creation, and space that honors creation is space that is genuine and authentic, not synthetic or pretending to be something that it is not. It is made of materials that are God-grown, from the abundance of creation, respectfully used, and that are beautiful and well crafted. It is space that has changing interest over the course of the day or season. It is space that respects the earth and is at home in its natural environment. It is space that contains multivalent symbols (remember Chapter 2) that speak through all the changes and chances of life. In sacred spaces, beauty and justice can walk hand in hand. This sacred goodness means, for example, that we avoid using materials that pretend to be something they are not, thereby denying the realities of the creation. Living plants or flowers harvested from people's gardens, then, are preferable to silk flowers; fine furniture made from natural materials is preferable to wood-grain plastic laminate; real wax candles are preferable to electric or tube candles.

In the worship space, beauty is a portal to the mystery of God and a witness to Christian faith and truth. Beauty is revealed through the honest use of the materials of God's creation. Principle S-20

God's incarnation makes space sacred

The incarnation further sanctifies the whole creation as sacred space. The incarnation is the presence of God among us in Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” says John’s gospel (John 1:14a). That the Lord of the universe took on the flesh of creation, lived, walked, ate, died, and was raised makes creation sacred. And God remains graciously present to us today. Jesus’ resurrection let loose the power of his Spirit upon the creation. Jesus promised to remain with us, in his followers, the body of Christ, in word, meal, and bath. Sacred spaces can make Christ present. Sacred spaces can be incarnational.

Basic requirements for humans when they gather, together with what we know of how Jesus used space, set the norms for our worship spaces. Jesus used vessels, texts, and created matter in his worship and ministry. Space that honors the incarnation is space that invites a relationship, embodies the Lord, builds up the body of Christ, transforms, introduces Christ. And for Christians, this presence of Christ makes a space holy:

- Christ present in the living Word—in the assembly, in the sacraments of meal and bath, in the proclamation of biblical readings and the sermon
- Christ present in incarnational arts (art that makes Christ present)
- Christ present in creation as it is used in sacraments, buildings, furnishings, art, musical instruments, and seasonal environments

So what does it mean to strive for use of art and environment that makes Christ present? In the gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, Thomas needed something (someone) to see in order to believe. He needed to touch. Seeing is believing. Touching is believing. In the story of the paralytic and others like it, people came to the disciples and said, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” The woman in the crowd reached out and touched Jesus. Disciples still taste bread and wine to remember Jesus.

The Spirit brings faith, but Jesus knew that to grow in faith, we would need to see and touch and taste. He gave us bread and wine and water to touch and taste and see and smell and hear as symbols of his presence. In the spirit of the Word Made Flesh, Emmanuel, we seek to use incarnational arts to assist people to touch Jesus, to taste Jesus, to feel Jesus, to see Jesus, to meet Jesus. That’s why we come together, of course, week after week, on the first day of the week: to meet Jesus, to hear the story again. It’s our favorite story. We love to hear it. We never tire of it. We’re used to meeting Jesus on the first day of the week, in the community, in the bread, wine, water, and word.

When seekers, the unbaptized, the uncatechized, baptismal candidates, catechism students and the newly baptized, the bruised or weak in faith come to us and plead, “Sir/Madame, we would see

Jesus,' what do we do so that they may respond in faith, "It is the Lord! We have seen the Lord!"? When the assembly gathers each Sunday, what expectation do we have of our buildings or worship environments to make Christ present?

God's people make space sacred

The body of Christ gathered in prayer hallows the space used for worship. Principle 5-4

Christian worship space is not sacred because of any architectural feature or any particular worship appointment. For Christians, sacredness is not determined by the presence of things but by the presence of people. Ultimately only people, not things, grow in sacredness. Our presence as the people of God, as the body of Christ, as a baptizing people makes places where we gather sacred. Christ's presence in us makes us sacred. Now we can say that holy people make a holy space. The presence of the people of God, the body of Christ, sanctifies a space more than any other activity or experience or feeling does. In fact, the most common way to dedicate a church is to use it—to celebrate communion there—for the first time. The places where we gather weekly to celebrate word and meal, the places from which we are sent out in holy mission become for us "sacred places." It is in these places where we are reminded again who we are, whose we are, and how we are to live. It is in these places where we are re-formed into a baptizing people, bringing Christ to the world.

What makes space sacred?

The question "What makes a sacred space?" cannot be left entirely to the emotions. The answer contains much more than the subjective feeling that we all have about our favorite places of retreat, deliverance, natural beauty, prayer, or meditation. Space is not value neutral. Spaces are containers for symbolic communication, and symbols form people.

Spaces, sacred or secular, form people for good or ill. They are catechetical but not didactic. That means they form us, our faith, and our understandings of God and the church, by "whispering in our ear" more than by teaching logically arranged information and content to master. How we shape our spaces is becoming more critical as we encounter more and more people with no previous experience of the gospel. Because, for them, the first whispers of the gospel they may hear may very well come from our worship spaces.

Lawrence Hoffman, in his book *Sacred Places and the Pilgrimage of Life* identifies three types of sacred places: those of natural beauty, those of historical significance, and those made holy by human ritual. Christian experience as people of God includes all three types.

Natural beauty

Natural wonders and other places of great natural beauty are inherently sacred. We can all stand in awe at the edge of the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, or at the seashore. Perhaps it's your favorite

fishing hole, or revealed in your microphotography of the surface of a woodland creek. Maybe it's the desert or the wide-open expanse of Big Sky country, a jagged Colorado mountain range or the blue-shrouded Appalachian hills. These sacred places can be subjective, but most would agree about their basic beauty and the sense of awe they create for the creature contemplating the creator.

Historical significance

Some places become sacred over time because something significant happened there. That was true for the Israelites, for the early church, and is still true for us. For Israel, sacred places were first places of historical significance, places where God delivered them. In the story of Jacob's dream,

Jacob himself puts it beautifully. After falling asleep on what he thought was God-forsaken terrain, he awakens to see the ladder connecting heaven and earth. "Surely God is in this place," he concludes, "but I did not know it." Appropriately, he names the place: It is Beth El, "the house of God" (*Sacred Places*, p. 9).

Places where God delivered Israel were often marked with a monument, called an *ebenezer*. Often when Israel returned to those places they remembered God's saving activity. Over the centuries Israel's nomadic lifestyle became more settled. Then those saving acts began to be remembered in time, on a calendar, rather than by returning to the site of deliverance.

The church eventually developed its own calendar of God's saving activity through Jesus Christ, though pilgrims have always traveled to Jerusalem, Nazareth, Galilee, and Bethlehem to visit important sites from the life of Christ.

Human ritual and artistic creation

In a similar way, God's saving activity in our own lives makes spaces sacred over time. For my family, that space is an ELCA church building in rural eastern South Dakota near where our family from Trondheim, Norway, settled in 1879. Both the farm (where I have never lived) and the church (where I have never been a member) are sacred places of a sort. These places have achieved a sacred status in the family because they're where the weddings are held. They're where the funerals are held. We are there for Christmas or Thanksgiving. Those 1879 immigrants and most of every generation since then are buried there. It's where we go to hear the promise of the resurrection. It's where we expect Christ to come again. It was the right place for my ordination. It was where my sisters chose to be married, on the same spot where our parents were married. Sites acquire sacredness over time, like a tree or a pearl, which year in and year out lays down new layers of growth. I've lived in Michigan, Tennessee, Ohio, Wisconsin, and now Minnesota, and it is always to these sacred places that we return to see family, to worship together, for summer pilgrimages, holiday celebrations, and rites of passage. It's where we expect to meet Christ.

When they are new, these kinds of spaces are not naturally sacred, nor has any saving event yet occurred there. They are selected for other reasons, perhaps because that's where the Division for Outreach discovered a need for a new congregation, or where a mission congregation looking to build their first building found available land at a major intersection. Maybe the land was a donated farm field for a landlocked, small-town congregation building a new accessible sanctuary. Maybe enough immigrant Trondheimers had settled west of the river that they could create a new

community of faith. Most parish church buildings find themselves in this category. These sites need help in establishing their sacredness. That's why they are usually marked as sacred by some sign. A dedication rite is one such common sign. We dedicate churches, not to change them in their basic nature, but to begin to set them apart as a tool in God's saving work. Uniquely ecclesial architecture is a further sign.

Over time, as these church buildings accommodate weekly Sunday morning worship, baptisms, funerals, family events, and annual Easter and Christmas celebrations, their sense of sacred space grows. This sacred sense can be both a blessing and a curse as every person knows who has ever been involved in a process to change, renew, or replace a worship space.

These sites are sacred because the people who gather there are sacred. And over time, we become attached to those spaces because of our history with them. If the assembly's needs change and the building must change, or we outgrow the space, or we can't "get this thing to serve" without moving or rebuilding or renewing we must deal pastorally and respectfully with the range of emotions (grief, fear, excitement, hope) that the assembly will have about this sacred place, this place of encounter, this place where they have come to expect to find God.

Principles for Worship is careful not to make too great a claim for any action on our part in making a space sacred. God's activity in forming us as the body of Christ and God's presence in the word and the sacraments are what make spaces functionally sacred for us. That sense of sacredness remains attached to the people and the means of grace, more than to any specific place. "The body of Christ gathered in prayer hallows the space used for worship. The worshiping assembly is a place where God makes a home. Christ's presence is promised not under certain architectural forms but where two or three are gathered in his name" (principle S-4 and background S-4A, p. 71). In that sense, sacred spaces can be sold, abandoned, or repurposed. These actions may be pastorally and emotionally difficult because of an assembly's accumulated history, but they are not theologically difficult.

Sacred space is formational and evangelical

We can further say that sacred space is always formational and can be evangelical, two foundational stones for Lutheran thinking about worship space. The following chapters will take up those concerns. It is sufficient to say here that for any denomination, worship space is formational, for good and for ill, and worship leaders are wise to always consider how their spaces are shaping their assemblies, and conversely, how their understandings of being church shape their spaces. Additionally, Lutherans, who define themselves as an assembly among whom the gospel is preached in its purity, should be further concerned that sacred spaces, our worship spaces, are evangelical, that is, that they proclaim the gospel in their very composition, arrangement, and materials.

Can sacred space be ordinary space?

Sacred space may at times also serve ordinary purposes. There is nothing particularly sacred about making the church building available for a concert, for a foot-care clinic for the elderly, or for the

weekly Narcotics Anonymous, Suicide Survivors, or other community meetings. Many of our church buildings are used as polling places. These activities are secular (i.e. not sacred), but they are certainly not antithetical to the gospel purpose. It is our concern for mission, for justice, for being hospitable, for the abundant life of the entire community that motivates us to open the doors. In that sense, we may have a sacred motivation, but our guests' activities are ordinary, functional.

A hospitable worship space generously accommodates the assembly, its liturgy, and a broad range of activities appropriate to the life of the congregation and its surrounding community. Principle S-17

Holy mission sanctifies space

The ongoing challenge for congregations is the continuing evaluation of whether their spaces are serving them well, continually asking the question, "How are we gonna get this thing to serve?" Do all of our words make a great claim that is missing from our actions or from our buildings? Does the building stand up to the words of the liturgy? Is the building hospitably gathering, transforming through word and sacrament, and lovingly sending the assembly for the sake of the world? Are we designing the space or using the space in ways that help form congregations into evangelical, missionary, baptizing communities?

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. What does it mean that "God makes the world holy"? Can the whole creation be holy?
2. Name some examples of how your worship space has acquired a sense of holiness for you because of the history you have praying there.
3. Name as many sites of sacred deliverance from Israel's history that you can think of and recall their stories.
4. How does your worship space make Christ present for worshipers? What gets in the way?
5. Name one or two spaces in your life that fit into each of the following categories:
 - a. Places of natural beauty
 - b. Places of historical significance
 - c. Places of human ritual and artistic creation