

SACRED SPACE AND BLOODY BUSINESS

Theodore J. Wardlaw
Mark 1:21-28

I am honored to be here on this occasion when you are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of your Fellowship Hall. Kay and Shelby and Claire and I were here last night for the Tex-Mex party and the dancing in that room, and it was just a pleasure to see how that space fulfilled the vision that Jean Grover and others had for it. It's also so wonderful to see so many faces that Kay and I remember so fondly, and to be meeting so many of you who have come since, to join the life of this sturdy and faithful old church now over 350 years old. When we left Setauket, Shelby was almost three and we were expecting Claire; and so yesterday we drove around a bit—to the Old Field Lighthouse, and the Stony Brook Crescent, and the Mill Pond; and we believe that this area has never been more beautiful than it is now!

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Some time ago now, several election cycles ago, American humorist Garrison Keilor wrote an essay about a recent trip to Baltimore, and an encounter on a Sunday morning with sacred space. “[It was] a splendid Fall day under blue skies,” he writes, “[and] we marched off to the nearest church and found ourselves in an old brownstone temple of 1852, wooden box pews, stained glass on all sides, old tiled floor, for a high Anglo-Catholic Mass, a troop of choristers in white, altar boys, bearded priests in medieval vestments, holy water and puffs of smoke and bells and chanting of scripture, precision bowing and genuflecting, all rather exotic for an old fundamentalist like me but deeply moving...

“It was formal High Mass,” he continues, “none of that hi-and-how-are-we-all-doing-this-morning chumminess, and the homily only summarized the scripture texts about healing, it didn’t turn into an essay on health care. Ten voices strong and true in the choir and positioned as they were under the great arch of the chancel, their tender polyphonic Kyrie and Gloria infused the whole building with pure kindness.

“The singing,” he writes, “was O my God just heartbreakingly good. There were less than thirty of us in the pews, fewer than the names on the prayer list, and to hear ‘Behold, how good and joyful it is, brethren, to dwell together in unity’ sung so eloquently as the priests swung to their tasks was to be present in a moment of extravagant grace that does not depend on numbers or any other measure of success for its meaning, just as the Grand Canyon does not depend on busloads of tourists to be magnificent. Most of our brethren, bless them, are off enjoying brunch or reading the funnies or lifting weights at the gym, and our faithfulness does not make us better people. We simply happened to walk by and see this vast canyon of God’s love and stand looking into it.”

Keilor goes on to rhapsodize of what is essential about the work of worship that was going on in that church that day, much like the work that we about together just now. And finally he concludes: “Now I’m an old tired Democrat, sick of this infernal war that may go on for the rest of my life and in which more of our brethren will die miserably, both American and Iraqi. I’m sick of politics today, the cleverness and soullessness of it. I am still angry at Al Gore for wearing those stupid sweaters in 2000...and I am angry at everyone who voted for Ralph Nader. I hope that the next time they turn the key in their ignition their air bags blow up.

“But here in an old brownstone church at an ancient ceremony, there is a moment of separation from all the griefs of this world. Ten men and women are singing a cappella, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name,’ and their voices drench us fugitive worshippers kneeling, naked, trembling, needy, in the knowledge of grace, and when we arise and go out into Baltimore, the blessing follows us.”¹

That’s the most eloquent argument for sacred space and its purpose that I have heard in some time. And I can’t hear his description about that old church in Baltimore without thinking of this old church here. It is sacred space. Sacred space that turns us upside down and conveys a blessing. And it’s a counter-cultural argument, for sure, because the popular take on sacred space in our culture is that it is a kind of demilitarized zone on the other side of relevance into which we step when we’ve had too much of life as it is lived elsewhere, out there in the so-called “real world.” Sacred space, our culture so often tells us, is time-out space, where maybe what happens is something reflective and quiet and contemplative and perhaps even useless.

But if our text from Mark’s gospel is any indication at all, it may well be that the Biblical understanding of sacred space is thicker, by far, than ours. It may well be that, in the gospel of Mark at least, there’s more at stake in a sacred space than we are often prone to think. For sacred space, as far as Mark is concerned, is not primarily a place for quiet repose or a few verses of Kum-Ba-Yah; it is instead primarily a place for struggle.

Jesus and his just-recruited disciples—all of them brand new at this gospel business and hardly halfway through the very first chapter of Mark—“went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching,” Mark writes, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” We don’t know what exactly it was on that occasion that he taught them; but, whatever it was that he taught them, there developed a struggle. Not just *a* struggle, actually, but *the* struggle—between Jesus and a demon, between the God of all time and places and an anti-God, representative, maybe, of every other object of devotion that we’ve ever flirted with. Right there in the middle of sacred space, where, as far as Mark is concerned, what was going on was not entertainment or quiet repose but bloody business! Right there in sacred, Jesus exorcised a demon. To which the congregation responded: “What is this? A new teaching?”

Right here in Mark, hardly out of the first chapter, Jesus—standing somewhere, if you will understand my meaning, between the manger scene and the Paschal candle—is demonstrating a kind of teaching that has authority; a kind of theological education, if you will, that at its best is nothing less than exorcism.

Now what does this text say to us this morning? Maybe that we might want to think more deeply about the role of the faith to challenge the demonic assumptions of our culture that show up even now. I was in a meeting a while back of a few faculty and board members—it was a task force of some sort—and we were thinking in specific ways about the direction we would chart for the future. One board member said, “Well, whatever we do, we should always strive for balance.” Well, that sounded like a reasonable comment and he was a deeply-respected leader; and no one said anything. Until finally one senior faculty member (with tenure, thank God) spoke up. “With all due respect,” he said, “a seminary—a church, too—should always be about the gospel, and the gospel is always a bigger thing than merely striving for balance.” Well, he took my breath away! Because I’m sometimes taken with the notion that, in any argument, the greatest virtue is in being right down the middle line. And I

¹ Garrison Keilor, “A Remembrance of Dad in Baltimore,” syndicated.

needed to hear that, because sometimes I have been guilty of turning “balance” into a demonic assumption. And there are other demonic assumptions—like the narrow partisanship that so infects the life and public discourse of our country in these days. You’re either a Fox News person or an MSNBC person and you’ve got to choose which. Assumptions that are so powerful to us, in part, because we’ve gotten so comfortable with them that we have failed to recognize how demonic they are.

But what’s happening all through the Gospel of Mark is that Jesus is confronting a world with the news that the Kingdom of God is near, and that that nearness changes every routine assumption we have about the way the world works. And this project, by the way, is not just a matter of imparting new information; it’s the bloody business—even, in fact especially, in the midst of sacred space—of exorcising the power of the old information. And, before this gospel is over, it’s clear that our job, too, is to take part in that bloody business, if we’re up for it. For, after all, if the church cannot take part in the call of the Kingdom of God to follow a different, transformational set of values that turns the world upside down, then, to put it theologically, who in Hell can?

Once in a while, we get to see what happens when the Gospel mesmerizes the world, and it’s always a stunning sight. And those who have eyes to see and ears to hear are always amazed at it.

A while back, at the graduation exercises at Emory University, there were four people who received honorary degrees. The exercises were held outside, and it was a nice, crisp Spring day, and those graduating seniors had more on their minds than the dusty obligations of academic ceremony. So, for the most part, as the ceremony droned on up at the stage, they tossed their mortar boards in the air and threw Frisbees to one another and just generally gave it all the back of the hand, the thumb of the nose. One of the honorees was a Nobel Prize-winning mathematician, another was an African-American ambassador to an African country, and still another was Alfred Uhry—the playwright who wrote *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Last Night of Ballyhoo*. Pretty impressive people, I would say, but the Frisbees and the mortar boards kept on flying.

Until the last guy was honored, and it was the only time that the students at graduation settled down. He was a helicopter pilot who had flown missions during the Vietnam War. He was the guy who intervened with his helicopter at the My Lai Massacre. Right there in the middle of a moment when Lieutenant Calley and various of his men were attempting to kill a mother holding a baby, the man set his helicopter down between the mother and the baby and those men. For thirty years he was considered unpatriotic; he was court-martialed, in fact. And then, we got more perspective, I guess, and on this day he was receiving an honorary degree. He stood up at the podium and said, “I’ve always lived with words I first learned from my parents: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”²

“What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

Think of what you’ve learned in this sacred space—or in spaces like it somewhere else.

When I was the Pastor here, long before we had opened as a denomination the matter of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, those in the Synod of the Northeast who were supportive of such openness requested that this church serve as the host for the annual meeting. This was in the 1980’s, and LGBTQ people, and people in support of removing the barriers blocking the full leadership of

² Thanks to my friend the Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, who told this story during the 2003 meeting of the Moveable Feast lectionary group meeting in Louisville.

LGBTQ Christians, would gather here for a weekend, and would be in this sanctuary for worship on that particular Sunday morning.

I remember so vividly the Session meeting at which we considered the request. All over the country there was great fear around this issue; and a lot of discussion that night turned around the “optics” of it. There was a particular exchange between two elders—both of whom I deeply loved, and both of whom have now gone to glory. One of them said, “I just don’t want a story in the *Three Village Times* that says we’re the church that invited that group to come here.” And the other responded, “Well, I don’t want a story in the *Three Village Times* that says we’re the church that *didn’t* invite that group to come here.” And in that moment, the question of balance was off the table. It was now a question of what was faithful, what was right. And for some in that room, it was a new teaching—with authority.

And on the Sunday morning of that weekend during which that conference happened here, this sacred space was full! The place was joyful. The singing was amazing. And the gospel was evident—abundantly so—right here in this sacred space, until the whole building was infused with kindness.

That’s the sort of thing that is always happening here in sacred space—to the glory of God.