

Sanctuary

Sanctuary. We use the word all the time, usually to refer to the large area where our ten o'clock Sunday service is held – as opposed to the smaller area called the Chapel, where we worship at eight o'clock. But the word means more than that.

In the Hebrew Bible, “sanctuary” meant the place where a person could flee and be safe from harm at the hands of enemies. In that age of blood feuds, the law established “Cities of Refuge” in every tribe's land where a person could flee and be safe from vendettas. But even more important than these cities was the holy shrine itself. A person being sought by enemies could go to the tabernacle, or temple, take hold of the “horns of the altar” and be safe from harm. The word “sanctuary” actually means “holy place,” and is based on the fact that in the holy place, all are safe. The idea that the sanctuary was a place of refuge for fugitives took hold in the early Christian church as well. In the Dark Ages, when justice was uncertain and what justice existed was administered by feudal warlords, the Church took seriously its role as a place of safety from one's enemies. On holy ground, no matter who was after you, you were safe.

That's important, by the way: “no matter who was after you.” In the Bible and in the Church, sanctuary was not just offered to people who had been *falsely* accused of crimes, but also to those who were clearly guilty. The idea seems to be that *once you are in the holy place, you are before God and God alone*. There, at the altar, only God's judgment matters. Outside, you may have to face your pursuers, but at God's altar, you stand before only One.

We've lost much of that sense of holy ground, that sense that this place of worship is also a place of refuge for fugitives. The old idea – of sanctuary from the law – is nearly forgotten entirely. But there are as many different kind of fugitives as there are kinds of injustice – racial, economic, legal, and more – and there are fugitives who seek shelter from each kind. There are those who are burdened by circumstance, by illness, by age. There are those who are imprisoned by minds that are failing, preventing them from under-standing, and others who are imprisoned by minds that desperately seek truth, preventing them from believing.

The Church of Jesus Christ should be a sanctuary for all, a place of refuge, a place of rest, a place where none have to defend themselves or explain them-selves or surrender their selves. It does not matter whether people are guilty or innocent, holy or profane: we should still be a Place of Refuge. In my sermons in January and February I will be exploring what that actually might mean in practice – what it might mean for the sorts of programs we begin, who we welcome within our doors, and how we treat the homeless gentleman who wanders in during coffee hour.

From the Pastor's Desk January 2014

This is the rule of sanctuary: at the altar of God, our judgment does not count.. Only God's judgment matters here. And God is is more gracious than we are.