

Building for Faith in Action: Sanctuary

April 30, 2023

Making the Old New Again

For many, the Psalm I just read is the ultimate comfort. It's your favorite meal from childhood, the smell of clean laundry, birdsong on a spring morning. And yet, I wonder how often we really think about some of the images.

Take, "he sets me a table before my enemies." I don't know about you, but one of the last things I want to do is have dinner with my enemies. That seems like a formula for indigestion – trying to play nice and bottle up our differences or being on edge, waiting for them to say or do whatever it is that makes us enemies to begin with.

As I was praying with this scripture, and was thinking about enemies, politics came to mind. Talk about an adversarial experience right now. The idea of God sitting me down to dinner with some lawmakers or politicians...shiver.

But it wasn't always like this. Sure, there have always been different ideologies in Washington, but there has been a marked shift in partisanship in the last 30 years that has been attributed, in part, to one thing: the shortened congressional work week. Before the mid '90s, the congressional work week was 4 to 5 days. Because that resulted in a 2-day weekend, many congresspeople moved their families to D.C. for the duration of their term rather than endure the quick turnaround of a 2-day weekend.

One of the major shifts in the mid '90s was to have Congress in session only three days a week. This was sold as an effort to help them spend more time in their districts, spend more time with their constituents. That may be well and good, but what it also means is that fewer and fewer legislators now move their families to Washington, and this results in them spending less time together off Capitol Hill.

You see, before the shortened congressional work week, there were a lot more instances where they had to be human to one another. They were cheering for each other's kids because they were on the same soccer team or were doing a science fair project together. Their partners had to work together in the PTO. In short, these enemies had ample experiences of being across the table from one another when they weren't across the aisle.

When we read that God "lays a table for me before my enemies," I wonder if part of the grace of that image isn't the fact that, when we spend time together doing the things that didn't create the animosity between us, we become more human to one another. We start recognizing one another as real people and caring about one another, and in turn, it's harder to do things that hurt one another.

Sanctuary

For the next seven weeks, as our church undertakes a capital campaign for the purpose of raising funds for some much needed upkeep and renovations, we are going to be highlighting some of the different core roles that Union plays, inviting all of us to sink our teeth into why we value this church's ministry, with the hope that that will, in turn, inspire us to invest in Union's future.

Today as we kickoff our Building for Faith in Action campaign, our leadership team invites us to contemplate church as sanctuary, that is, how Union provides both us and the wider community with space of safety and respite. Barbara's reflection was so poignant today, and I am quite sure that she's in good company here, that many of you have found within these walls a place to breathe, a place to let your shoulders down, a place to let go of the tension of whatever you've been carrying, to allow it to flow out of you, even for a moment.

As the Psalm says, God "leads me beside still waters and restores my soul." Go ahead and take a moment to allow yourself to experience that image a little deeper. Center yourself on your seat. If it helps, put both feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes. Lower your shoulders. Breathe deeply. Invite the divine to restore your soul once more. When you're ready, go ahead and open your eyes.

One of the times that church is at its best is when we function as sanctuary, and while being a peaceful, tranquil place is one component of sanctuary, there are numerous more. Take another verse from Psalm 23, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." I'll admit, that for the longest time, I struggled with this verse because the image that I had of a rod was "spare the rod, spoil the child." I imagined that a shepherd's rod was used to beat or punish, and the violence of that always kept me off balance. As someone who has walked with too many people in the realm of domestic violence, the idea of a rod being a comfort was something I just couldn't abide by.

Then I read excerpts from Phillip Keller's book, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23," and learned that a shepherd's rod is not a tool for beating or punishment. Rather, it's a long, thin stick with a number of uses. Two stood out for me. First, a shepherd can throw the rod between the sheep and a predator. Thus, it can function to scare and separate. But the use that I find most compelling, is that shepherds will use their rod to part a sheep's fleece in order to help them check for wounds and parasites. A shepherd's rod is a tool that is used to get to know a sheep's wounds, so that the shepherd can help the sheep to heal.

What a completely different meaning than what our 20th century American use of the word "rod" would suggest. This verse isn't about beating or punishing or violence, but rather about intimacy and being partners in healing.

As we highlight the ways that Union is a sanctuary, this exercise in redeeming the image of a shepherd's rod functions, I hope, on at least two levels: that this place and this community help us to access the intimacy and healing the shepherd's rod represents. And also, I hope the fact that it's okay to struggle with scripture and ideas and teachings and theology at Union is a sanctuary for you, too. So very often, I hear from people who struggled and felt off balance in their former churches because of rigid teachings and interpretations of scripture. One of the ways that Union functions as sanctuary is as a safe harbor for a breadth of beliefs.

Ruth

If the 23rd Psalm helps us to look at how Union's role as sanctuary encompasses being a peaceful place for respite, a community that fosters intimacy and space for healing, and a church where it is not only safe but highly valued that you think and process and question, then the passage from Ruth which I asked Karen to read for us today encompasses at least two more facts of Union as sanctuary.

First, in Ruth, we encounter an ancient example of a non-nuclear family structure. The story goes like this: Naomi and her husband had moved to a foreign country. They had two sons. Naomi's husband died. The sons married local women, one of whom is named Ruth. The sons died. Naomi hears that her country of origin is prospering and decides to return, and Ruth commits to going with her. They are a family.

In Ruth, we see a family structure that isn't about sexuality or gender or procreation. It's about commitment to someone. Period. They are the same gender. They are of different generations. They are from different ethnic backgrounds. They aren't going to have children together.

Part of how many of us experience Union as sanctuary can be traced to Naomi and Ruth, and our experience that how we have created our families is not merely allowed or tolerated, but valued and celebrated. I'll say it again, God doesn't care who you love, God cares that you love, and Union is a sanctuary for that.

The other facet of sanctuary that this passage from Ruth helps me to access is that, while this church building and church community serve as sanctuary for us, Ruth inspires us to carry these commitments back out with us, into the great unknown. It's about integrity, isn't it?

Since the early 2000s, the United Church of Christ has used a tagline, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." That is sanctuary. Union strives to serve that facet of sanctuary, whether around differences in belief, in family structure, in country of origin. We live sanctuary when we live, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here."

Conclusion

If our church is going to fulfill our covenant to "make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations," this function of being a sanctuary has to be a two-way street. It's beautiful and powerful and critical that this is a place of safety and respite and intimacy. And, the challenge Christ gives us, then, is to carry those experiences back out with us, serving as agents of divine healing and grace. My prayer for us all in the coming days and weeks is that we will both have experiences of divine sanctuary and that we will embody sanctuary in the world around us. May it be so. Alleluia, and amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Psalm 23; Ruth 1:1-17
April 30, 2023