

Creating Sanctuaries

A sermon preached by Carol Penner
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Texts: Psalm 32, Exodus 25:3-9

What do you call this place where we are meeting? Do you call it an auditorium? A meeting house? A house of God? A Sanctuary?

The word sanctuary in English comes from the Latin word *sanctuarium*, meaning a sacred place. I grew up in a church where we called our worship space a sanctuary. It felt like a holy or sacred place to me. I remember that even as a little girl it felt like a holy place to me. A big, high space, a beautiful space, with high windows and a thick, red carpet, the oak pews in orderly rows. It felt very holy to me.

In calling it a sanctuary, our church was standing with a tradition that goes back to the ancient Hebrews who built God a house in the desert. It was a tabernacle in the wilderness. They called it a Hebrew word that we translate as “sanctuary”. It was a sacred place. The scripture we read today from the book of Exodus describes that place. They were given very detailed instructions about this holy place, this sanctuary.

The Hebrew word we translate as sanctuary doesn’t just refer to the tent in the wilderness, it doesn’t just refer to the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was any place that you met God
Exodus 15:17

**You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.**

In the time of Ancient Israel, there were many religions that included the ritual of sacrifice on an altar within their holy spaces. Many ancient religions had a practice that if you were in trouble, if you were in so much trouble that someone was trying to kill you, you could flee to the altar, and no one could touch you there. There was a belief that it would be wrong to kill someone at a sacred space. It would be wrong to tear someone away from a sacred space when they were taking refuge there.

Ancient Israel was no different. In the book of Kings we read of Joab, one of King David’s generals who revolted against him. Joab was in serious trouble with the king, who wanted to kill him. Kings 2:28 tells us that “Joab fled to the tent of the Lord and grasped the horns of the altar.” The sanctuary was seen as a safe place, a place you could turn to for refuge. Listen to these words from Ezekiel 11:16:

“Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far away among the nations,
and though I scattered them among the countries,
yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone.”

This verse talks about God as a sanctuary, as a safe place.

Lately in the news we have been hearing the word sanctuary. Some churches especially in the United States are saying they will be a sanctuary to people who are facing deportation. Refugees who are about to be forcibly removed from the country find refuge in a church. They go in and they don't come out. The immigration officials don't want to force their way into a church to make an arrest. We are even hearing about cities calling themselves sanctuary cities, who will protect refugees who face deportation. They are saying, "Come here, we will keep you safe, you will find sanctuary here."

The world needs safe places. I think it's appropriate that when we come to church we call it a sanctuary. It means a lot. We need a safe space, not just a safe space for you and me, and our friends but church as a safe space, where anyone walking through that door, can be welcomed and treated and with respect. I remember years ago I was on a trip to Tanzania. This was the furthest I had ever been from home. We travelled all day to the remotest place I had ever been. And when we arrived there was a group of people outside a church, waiting for us. I still remember all these women in beautiful dresses coming towards our vehicle, singing and smiling. One of their group came forward to shake our hands, and she said, "I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ." This made a big impact on me. I was so far from home, and so lonely at that point. I was being greeted like family, in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is appropriate that we offer welcome and greeting to each other in the name of Jesus Christ because of course Jesus was himself a sanctuary. People who came to him would find a welcome there. People who were rejected by others, were welcomed. People with leprosy, the woman caught in adultery, the man from Gerasene who would run naked in the tombs, even he came and sat at the feet of Jesus in safety and peace. People felt safe with Jesus because he loved them. Psalm 32 reads:

"You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance."

Steadfast love surrounds us in Jesus' presence.

So here we all are a group of people safe in the arms of Jesus in a place called a sanctuary. Surely you can assume that this, of all places, will be safe, right? A place where we all get along, right?

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of safety anywhere on this earth. Sin is a reality in our world, and we find it even when people gather to worship. We can only strive for safe places, we cannot guarantee them. Everywhere there are groups of people, we have rules and guidelines to help us, to guide us towards safe behavior. The Criminal Code of Canada is a type of safe place policy. We want our country to be safe. We have laws that protect us from killing each other, laws that encourage civil behavior.

Schools, businesses and professional organizations of all kinds have safe place policies. Now I know that we have high hopes for the church. As followers of Jesus, shouldn't we have a lower percentage of bad behavior? We strive not just for civility and not killing each other, we strive for love in the church. Shouldn't the church be a safer place than other places? Yes, there is love and caring in the church but unfortunately, people bring every part of their humanness to the church, and that includes the humanness that leads to hurting each other.

Robert Frost, the great American poet, is famous for his poem "Mending wall". A character in the poem says, "Good fences make good neighbors". I've heard that people use that poem to describe safe place policies. Good fences make safe neighbours. There is another Robert Frost poem that I really like, it's called "Roughly Zones". It's a poem set in the middle of winter, and the people in the poem are warm and snug in the house as the wind howls, but their thoughts are all about the peach tree they planted.

They know they planted the tree in an agricultural zone where it could easily be killed by a cold winter. Frost writes,

“That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed.”

The poet observes that people keep testing the boundaries, always trying to plant things where they probably can't survive. And on this particularly cold night, he observes,

“The tree has no leaves and may never have them again.

We must wait till some months hence in the spring to know.”

Damage may have been done because they planted the tree in a danger zone, a zone where it is likely that cold will kill the tree.

I think this poem has something to say about safe place policies that we make for our churches. We can say from experience that there are roughly zones where we know abuse happens. Most abuse happens when an adult is alone with a child, one on one. It doesn't mean that whenever an adult is alone with a child they will abuse a child. It's just that if it is going to happen, this is the zone it happens in...the one-on-one zone. So that's why our policies exist in churches, we try to avoid an adult being alone with a child. “There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed,” as Robert Frost put it.

In the same way, most abuse happens when an adult takes a child to a place where they won't be caught. That's why we put windows on doors in churches. It's not that being in a space without windows makes abuse happen. It's just that we can roughly say that zones without windows are the places where abuse happens. So we eliminate those areas from our buildings.

There are other ways that we can help make safe spaces and eliminate abuse. Ways that might not be in a safe place policy. A lot of abusive behavior, the majority of abusive behavior, happens in the privacy of our homes. I think that talking about the problem of abuse, and that the home is the zone where abuse happens, is a way of de-stigmatizing it, and making us aware. Where does abuse happen? It happens in our Christian homes. Just saying this out loud in church gives people permission to admit what is happening in their own homes. It may give them permission to ask for help.

I think of a woman I knew once whose husband was physically abusing her. She was able to come to me and tell me her story. Why could she do that? Was it because I was a woman? Was it because in our church we pray for people who are being abused? Was it because I happened to visit her at a time where she felt most desperate? Did she have a sense that I would believe her because I am a person who has admitted that abuse happens in Christian homes? In any case she told me her story.

We want to be a church where people can come with their stories, where they will be believed. We want the church to be a sanctuary, a place of refuge, for people who are being hurt. Come to church, we will listen and believe you!

Now in the situation of this woman, coming to church didn't mean she immediately found a place of safety. I think she found a relief from the secrecy, but she didn't find safety, at least not then. I went with her to the women's shelter, and they listened to her story too. They told her that they were worried her husband would kill her. The violence she had been experiencing had escalated. Her husband had disabled their phone, he had isolated her from her family, and he had a gun on the property. The people at the shelter invited her to stay with them. They explained how they could get a police officer to go with her the next day to get her things.

But she wouldn't, she didn't. As a church we are not there to rescue adults against their will. We can offer a safe place, but we cannot enforce a safe place. Thankfully she did survive. It's a challenge being a safe church when you know you have people who are assaulting and people who are being assaulted in your midst. And you can't confront the assaultive behavior because you can't betray the confidence of the woman who shared the story with you. You know that if her husband found out she told her story, she might face even more violence. So you try to extend community to her, to keep her from being isolated. And you just preach about love, you preach about non-violence, you preach about controlling anger. You preach about the importance of being a safe space for each other. Not just HAVING a safe place policy but being safe people. The church as sanctuary...as a community of safety.

I think of a different woman I knew. She was quite elderly, a widow, but her nephew was living with her. She was frail and the nephew's presence in her apartment allowed her to remain in her own home. Without him, she would probably have had to move into a senior's residence. I was having lunch with her one day, and she seemed troubled. She had recently gotten out of the hospital. I asked her whether she was worried about her health.

Slowly, bit by bit, she told me the story. How she needed to pay some bills while she was in the hospital so she had given her debit card to her nephew. When she got out of the hospital, she found that he had not paid the bills, but had taken a large sum of money out of her account without asking. She was a person who lived from pension check to pension check. She had had to borrow some money from a friend to make ends meet, and pay her bills.

"What are you going to do about your nephew?" I asked

"What can I do?" she said.

I talked with her about different options. She could call another family member to intervene, she could get a mediator to talk with her and her grandson, or she could call the police and press charges. She could call a social worker who might have other ideas I couldn't think of. I offered to help her contact any of these people. But she rejected all of these solutions. "No, no, no." All of the solutions that involved talking to or confronting her nephew were ruled out. Because her independence in her own home was dependent on his presence, she would not jeopardize that. His theft was balanced out by her care for him, and the help he was giving her.

Being a safe church meant that we were a place where she could go for help. A safe place where it was OK to admit that your family member was stealing from you. Could we guarantee or enforce safety? Unfortunately, no. It was important not to think that we could rescue her. We could give her options, and it was important to let her choose the option that best fit her life, her circumstances.

It's different when the people being hurt are children, or dependent adults. Then we have a responsibility to report to the proper authorities in society, so that safety is guaranteed. Unfortunately, sometimes the church has not done this. Sometimes we have thought that we can get people to abuse to repent, and they won't do it again. Abuse is a complicated problem. It needs to be stopped, people need to be held accountable, we need to find out if there are other victims. The church cannot be a sanctuary if we are hiding people who hurt children, and protecting them from the consequences of their actions. We aren't a sanctuary if we are enabling them to hurt other children.

I have met people who hate that churches have safe place policies. They hate that we have to even talk about abuse in church. They worry, "How will this impact evangelism...who will want to come to our church if we tell them right up front that we have problems like this here?"

I respond by reversing their comment. "What kind of witness do we give if we pretend that we live in a perfect community, and that everyone who comes here is wonderful, and sin isn't a problem for us." That's just bad theology. This side of heaven, we are living with sin, and the more open we are about it, the more likely we are to see it, name it and address it. We are a broken people. We live and suffer with all kinds of different tragedies. We offer the steadfast love of God to each other, love from a God who knows we are not perfect but who still welcomes us with open arms.

I think that's the good news I share with you today. God is good, and it is in God's presence that we find sanctuary. I will close with a verse from a hymn I remember singing in the sanctuary of the church I grew up in. It's from the hymn "God Himself is with us" by Gerhardt Tersteegen

Come, abide within me;
Let my soul, like Mary,
Be Thine earthly sanctuary.
Come, in-dwelling Spirit,
With transfigured splendor;
Love and honor will I render.
Where I go here below
Let me bow before Thee,
Know Thee and adore Thee.

I hope that we can be a sanctuary to each other in church, and that we will do that in the name of Jesus Christ. The best way to do this is to admit that abuse happens in Christian homes and churches, to keep our eyes peeled for it, and to pray for wisdom when we are called to help.