

The Open Sanctuary

Luke 13:10-17

When I returned home from vacation after spending my Sabbath rest in Nature's lovely landscape up north, I was taken aback when I first stepped into this sanctuary (appreciating, may I add, what happens when the pastor leaves town)! It was like coming home the morning after a week of partying!

For those of you who missed it last Sunday, "Jaws IV" was covering the chancel leading into the baptismal tank, with a row of 12-inch teeth that would convince any wandering soul who happened through the open doors of our meetinghouse that this was home for some very serious Baptists. Hopefully, this intimidating impression would have been offset by the playful purple octopi stationed on the pulpit and lectern, along with the hanging jelly fish and plastic fish adorning the balcony. Honestly, I came back thinking one of two things: either it looked like an aquatic playland or maybe a sign that Ford's was expanding their operations for overflow parking.

Of course, all of this was part of the festivities related to our annual Vacation Bible School, which I understand had over 75 kids and another 25-30 helpers and teachers throughout the week. What a delight that must have been and what a treat it was to share this experience with our friends at Union Baptist! We're already looking forward to next year and some other activities we can do together, including the Habitat house in Mystic.

If this creative chaos upset anyone's sensibilities, then it would only be because they haven't yet caught the nature and spirit of this congregation. We are very flexible and open with our sacred spaces in this meetinghouse, to our credit, I believe. Our facilities get used on a number

of occasions by different events and groups and we don't make a fuss about who can or cannot be here, or lock our doors to prevent access throughout the week. Individuals will pop into our sanctuary at just about any time; on occasion, we've even hosted overnight guests unawares.

Whether or not our insurance company embraces it, our open door policy is a profound statement of hospitality and trust to the general public—one that affirms the likelihood that the vast majority of people are respectful and trustworthy and that we have nothing to hide from or fear. There's always risk, to be sure; but it's a calculated risk erring on the side of trust based on honoring people with the benefit of the doubt, rather than presuming their presence would violate our house of worship.

I wish that were true of most churches today; we seem to be a rare exception to the universal rule that religious property is meant to be like a gated community—a private, sacred space dedicated to the worship of God, where doors are locked and sanctuaries are closed off unless offered to someone by permission. When you think about it, this is the standard practice of most property—public or private. Doors are locked for a reason—in order to protect that which belongs to someone for a particular use. Religious communities have their facilities for their private and exclusive use; schools and government buildings are open only when they are used for their intended purpose or when granted permission by those with oversight. Even more so, private homes are locked with the expectation that personal property must be protected from strangers. There's nothing wrong with this. It's prudent and necessary; it makes perfect sense. Whereas, what we do here, doesn't! We take a risk for a reason.

I've already mentioned that we open our meetinghouse and sanctuary because of what it reflects about hospitality and trust. But it also is a statement about how we see ourselves as part of this congregation. Not only are we not a gated community, we don't have gatekeepers within the church, as a rule. No one is entitled to access because of membership or authority, or denied it because you're not a member with access to a key. For practical purposes, we do lock the private offices of our staff, including mine. But generally speaking, the corporate use areas of the building are accessible 24/7 to anyone and everyone. That's crazy amazing!

But there's one more important rationale for why we have an open sanctuary. It's related to the relevant meaning of Sabbath. Our corporate times of worship don't always coincide with people's schedules—be it work or leisure. Sunday morning is our customary gathering time, as it has been since our founding nearly 175 years ago—a practice reflecting that Sunday was a normative day for worship and rest from ordinary activities for a majority of people. That's not the case today. Now there are no common times for Sabbath-taking (which, of course, has impacted our attendance on Sundays, as has a lessening of the requirement to attend worship altogether). Instead of being a common gathering time, worship is now an occasional activity of fewer people, as reflected in the trends of our society.

So what that means is, our open sanctuary serves as a ministry in its own right, by allowing those who cannot be here on Sunday morning to still enter this meetinghouse at a time when they can. Throughout the week, day or night, I'll often find someone in the sanctuary praying, or playing the piano, or simply sitting in a moment of quiet reflection. I assume, for whatever reason, they want to be here. They may not even be a part of the congregation, but it's a sacred space available to them when they need one.

The ready access means something to folks who are a part of this congregation and for those who are not. It's an open sanctuary made available to them to help them find their peace through God.

Honestly, I think we've got it right! As hard as it is to maintain dedicated space for worship, as precious as the contents of many religious properties are, as violated as some religious settings might be without protection of some sort, it seems to me that sanctuaries intended for the worship of God should always be open and welcoming, freely accessible and available to anyone in need. Practically speaking, this isn't possible, given the reasons I just noted. But when they can be, as we are able, it seems like this is the way it should be.

That said, our open sanctuary does run against the centuries-old notion that religious settings are meant to be distinct and separate from the rest of daily life—even exclusive to those who identify with the particular faith or tradition. In many circles, you have to be a recognized and true believer for there to be any use of the sanctuary. There are many justifications for that, including the word itself: sanctuaries are revered as sacred places separate and distinct from that which is considered worldly and profane, as a setting suitable to the worship of God—a holy place separated from normal course of human life, a setting where only the best can be presented and offered. Sabbath was the time of the week when one separated oneself from the daily grind in order to commune with God in “God's house,” as it was commonly called. So if a sanctuary is supposed to be “God's house,” how can anyone but a true, devout believer gain entrance without, in effect, dishonoring its intent (cf. “Holy of Holies”)?

Years ago, while I was the pastor of Second Baptist in Suffield, some alarm was raised over the use of the church sanctuary by Suffield Academy

for their weekly chapel service, due largely to damage caused by some careless students who were bored and marked up the pews and wrote in hymnals and the like. Understandably, it was upsetting to the congregation and we debated whether or not to end their access and use of the building, even though the relationship between the church and Academy had been continuous since 1833, when Connecticut Baptists founded the school as the Connecticut Baptist Literary Institution. As pastor, I didn't want us to suddenly react to vandalism with some draconian changes, though I recognized that few Academy students had any meaningful relationship with the church apart from sitting in our sanctuary once a week.

So the headmaster invited me to speak to the students during one of the weekly chapels. I suppose I could have made the argument that they are dishonoring "God's house," scolding them for their irreverence. But that day I chose a different tact. I appealed to their individual moral sensibilities and collective conscience about the meaning of "sacred," and the way that buildings, settings, environments, even personal belongings can have great value for what they represent or mean to the individuals and communities that cherish them.

I invited them to think of what was sacred to them; what did they value most in their life or possessions? Then, I asked them to consider all the people who had sat in those pews since the early 1800s when the building was erected—thousands over time who had celebrated births and marriages in that sanctuary, those who had suffered through the Civil War, through abolition, through two world wars, through the Great Depression, through all of the tragedies and deaths—all the joys and sorrows of life that had occurred in their families and this community, just in that space alone. Whenever we misuse property or fail to respect someone else's sense of

what is meaningful to them, we are in effect deliberately harming the people who consider it sacred, mocking their stories and their worth, and contributing to the distrust that exists in humanity. When a person cannot be trusted in a context of receiving hospitality and care, then they are undermining the basic trust that allows us to share this planet and build a society together. Like the broken window effect, even little careless, harmful deeds leave their damaging impact on the entire environment. Harming something sacred to another person harms them.

I may have been shameless in my pedantic admonition, but as I recall, the response to my appeal was genuinely positive, with a renewed sense among staff and students of the meaning associated with this particular sanctuary and for their own mutual respect, while living in dorms and in an academic community. Everyone has something sacred to them that is set apart and valued that others should respect and treat with care. They don't have to be religious to understand what's sacred to them. For some, it is a certain place; for others, it might be some personal belonging or memory; but in the end, it comes down to recognizing the sacredness of other people—that ultimately, what's sacred are people—each person has God-given value that needs to be respected, valued, honored, and protected from harm.

I wasn't making a unique point. This was one of Jesus' continual rebukes of religious practice that had lost a sense of the sacred value of people. He didn't question the sacredness of the Sabbath or the synagogue sanctuary; he just placed a higher priority on the sacredness of people. What was often missed was the sacredness of *every person's life* demonstrated by the criticism leveled at him for healing a suffering woman in today's text from Luke.

Yet, as Jesus pointed out on more than one occasion: the Sabbath wasn't instituted for God's sake; it was for the sake of human beings. The primary purpose of the Sabbath was to protect human beings from suffering; worshipping God was a response of thanksgiving for this day of deliverance from work and toil, and for the blessings of life.

Sabbath-keeping wasn't a pious duty that determined one's relative status before God. It was instituted to protect people from being enslaved to their labor and duties; without a Sabbath they would be forced to work all the time, seven days a week. It was a day of deliverance from the daily grind and an opportunity to be restored through rest. Its religious value and significance was that it was a divine commandment to preserve the Sabbath for everyone—to revere human life enough that taking care of people at all levels of life would be of the highest order and priority for humankind. Delivering another person from suffering (as Jesus did this story) is the highest spiritual, moral, and ethical act of devotion one can express to God! Maintaining the Sabbath and a sanctuary were to serve that end—to deliver people from their pain! Everything else amounts to spiritual window-dressing, relatively speaking. The Sabbath was made for human beings, not solely for the worship of God.

For me, the ethical and religious implications are profound and far-reaching. Though every person and community has their sacred memories and objects and settings, though an extraordinary amount of resources goes into buildings and maintaining religious properties and sanctuaries to honor and worship God, if all of this becomes an end unto itself and exclusive in its usage, then the point of religious faith has been missed! Restoring life is what is most valuable and sacred. That's the meaning behind keeping the Sabbath, whenever it takes place during the course of a

week in any person's life. The Sabbath isn't just one specific day of the week; it can be any day of the week to address human need. Our ethical duty is to advocate to protect that right and need—to help people find rest, renewal, and restoration for their lives. The open doors of our meetinghouse is an attempt to accommodate this flexible sense of Sabbath-keeping.

It also reminds us that, in spite of our precious buildings and ornate settings, a true sanctuary that spiritually restores people is one that can be found anywhere; but if it is here, then it should always be accessible—a real commitment on our part that seeks to restore trust that is eroding in everyday life. Sabbaths and sanctuaries are gifts to honor God when, and only when, we welcome all people and seek to help them in their suffering and to build relationships of good will and community trust with them.

That's why we have an open sanctuary—for you, for me, for friends and strangers, for neighbors and visitors, for believers and nonbelievers—even for sharks, and octopi and jelly fish! Are we saints for doing this? Only in the way the early church understood the term: average people who actually get what Jesus was teaching and who try to follow his ways as best they can. It's the Christian thing to do; it's the righteous way to be. May we remember that our spiritual home is an open sanctuary—a place of endless hospitality and generosity, reflective of God, so that everyone who enters here can feel welcome as well.

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