

Sanctuary: Welcomed Just as We Are

We had settled in for the night camped on a wide expanse of beautiful Laurentian shield facing east, ideal for an early morning swim when the sun came up. Others had come before us leaving a fire ring with dry stacked wood beside it. Dinner had been easy, the fire was doused, the packs were hung up in the tree so the bears would not feast on our food, and we were happily ensconced in our tent bundled up in sleeping bags. Then we heard the crack – the skies split open with lightning, wind whooshed in, and thunder louder than any we'd ever heard before echoed around us as we huddled exposed on the open rock that only a few hours earlier we had celebrated. It was terrifying and we prayed that our tent would be sanctuary enough. In such circumstances, we knew we were not alone in hoping that God might be our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, so that though the winds may blow, the trees may shake, and the waters may foam, we might find sanctuary.

Sanctuary ... what does this word evoke and where can we find it? A shelter, tent, hiding place, haven, refuge, stronghold, rock, and shield. All of these,

And in the Hebrew Scriptures sanctuary is seen as God's dwelling place which in the wilderness was the tent of meeting; in the time of Solomon, the Temple of Jerusalem; and today in this space – our church – which is also called a sanctuary.

We are in the midst of a time that calls for sanctuaries. Sanctuaries for those fleeing from disappointment, abuse, and violence. Sanctuaries for refugees, especially young children. Sanctuaries for the homeless.

I worked as a chaplain in a women's homeless shelter. None of the women had expected to be homeless nor did they wish to be seen that way. From some I would hear complaints, resentment at being treated with less than respect, despair ... and from others I heard gratitude that the shelter had saved their lives, helped them become sober, and offered friendship. They had their hopes and I heard many say, "I hope to get out of here, have my own place again, and support myself.... Then I can give back."

Only two days ago I read the most extraordinary story of a woman who has done exactly this. Some of you may have read it. It was about Membere Akilu, the beloved owner of a Richmond restaurant, Salute e Vita, which was having to close. Membe, as she is known, has had a painful past. She saw her mother killed in her home country of Ethiopia, lived in a homeless shelter in Italy, and raised her son in government housing in Oakland. And yet it was this past, she says, which prepared her for success, led to her owning the restaurant eight years after being hired as a minimum-wage hostess, and inspired her to give free meals to thousands of homeless people, veterans, and low-income mothers. Membe's favorite memories over the past nine years have been serving over 1000 people free Thanksgiving lunches where those who are homeless are served with dignity. And on Mother's Days over the past eight years, she has given about 100 single, low income moms what she billed as a "Yes You Are Worthy" event with a free lunch preceded by a beauty salon trip and her story of being a single low-

income mom who rose to success. Salute e Vita, which means Health and Life, closed eight days ago but Membe hopes to open it again within the year in Point Richmond. Many will celebrate its return for it has been a sanctuary for thousands who have been seen, welcomed, known and hugged by her.<sup>i</sup>

And in his own way, the beggar who saw Emily fall knew the importance of being seen when he immediately responded, “I shoulda seen ya!!” He and Emily reached out for each other, shared names, and hugged. This too was sanctuary.

“We can look upon the nearest face, again and again, never seeing the beauty in each other, until one or both of us is suddenly revealed.”<sup>ii</sup>

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In our society, praise is often given to those who achieve, who are impressive and eloquent, who are striving for more. These successes may make for a good resume but what a gift it is to hear, “You are precious just the way you are. You don’t have to earn love. You are already loved.”

I am really interested in the popularity of the movie, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” People of all ages are flocking to see it. Fred Rogers’ message was and is radical. At a time when children’s cartoons were violent, television news was filled with the Vietnam War, and the government wasn’t listening, Fred Rogers spoke of love and relationships being the root of everything. He believed that love is what keeps us together and afloat and that the greatest evil is someone who makes you feel less than you are. He allowed his puppets to talk about hard feelings, feelings which his child self still understood, feelings we all have had. His puppet, Daniel the Striped Tiger, said “I’m scared. Could you give me a hug?” and Daniel also wondered “Am I a mistake? I’m not like anyone else.” And what did he hear in return, repeatedly? He heard, “I think you are just fine exactly the way you are.”

I am sure my parents hoped that I knew this but frankly, like many children, it was hard for me to hear it when I was young. In fact, my eldest daughter has urged me to share – and now truth will out! – that when “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” was first aired, I thought it was sappy and saccharin. Was the child in me feeling, “If I have to tough it out, why not the kids on that show?” Yet, today I think his message is unbelievably important. His answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” would have been you - and you - and you. All of us. For it is not a list of names but a way of being. Fred Rogers offered children sanctuary just the way Jesus, 2000 years ago, offered those on the margins sanctuary where they could belong.

We all want to belong, sheltered from the loneliness of life. With all God’s creatures, we long for this shelter. Birds migrate and build their nests again, salmon return to spawn in the place where they were born, and one afternoon when I saw a beaver in the Canadian wilderness nibbling away on shoreline shrubs it had me thinking he was being served high tea every afternoon! And we are no different. We too want to have a place we call home, where we are welcomed just as we are.

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In Africa they have the phrase “*Ubuntu*: I am because you are; you are because I am. ... Ubuntu.” Surely the rescue of 12 boys and their coach in Thailand offers us a profound example of Ubuntu. Their community, their country, and the entire world was watching and waiting to say, “Welcome home! We are because you are.”

I am because you are ... We find this in all world religions. In Sanskrit, the greeting *Namaste*, means, “The Spirit within me salutes the Spirit in you” – acknowledging that we are all made from the One Divine Consciousness. In Hindi, *Jai Bhagwan* means the same thing and Martin Buber’s sense of I-Thou made it so clear that it is only when we really see each other, not as the other but as an intimate one like us, that we are indeed home.

One of the greatest gifts my mother gave me was when I was in my later 40s and she was already in the midst of Alzheimer’s. She seldom remembered when I was with her last even if it had only been a few minutes earlier. And yet, one day when we sat beside each other on a couch talking, she suddenly patted my knee and said, “You are so real. You are so real.” I don’t know what prompted this but at that moment, I felt she was truly seeing me just the way I was. I had to achieve nothing. I was offering her sanctuary as she journeyed into a deeper darkness of unknowing but she in turn gave it to me.

Sanctuary means being in a place where we can be our most authentic self and that it is good enough. It is a place of storytelling for it is in telling our story that we move from loneliness into community. Sharing our stories helps us get in touch with our own inner wisdom which guides us. John O’Donohue reminds us that “The mystery of [our] presence can never be reduced to [our] role, actions, ego, or image.” He believed that [We] are an eternal essence [which] is the ancient reason why [we] are here.”<sup>iii</sup> Listening with undivided attention to another’s story validates their worth and may awaken the luminous essence within.

The theologian, Paul Tillich, said “The first duty of love is to listen”<sup>iv</sup> with compassion and kindness and the poet Shahbano Aliano tells us of such kindness, saying:

your kindness is a sanctuary for my weary soul  
your deep, silent listening opens a vast infinite space  
where all my cut-off, orphaned bits  
walk out in utter relief  
no longer crippled by the [burdens] they have suffered of themselves ...  
you’re accepted entirely as you are  
this is how it is  
hush, my dear  
it’s alright  
my dear  
it’s all okay.<sup>v</sup>

There are days for all of us when we wonder when or if it will be all okay. Our lives are hectic with obligations and responsibilities, news headlines and noise, social media and fake news; family and friends who are ill; loved ones who are dying. Where or when might we find sanctuary?

Parker Palmer, who describes sanctuary being as vital to him as breathing, responds:

Sometimes I find [sanctuary] in churches, monasteries, and other sites designated as sacred. But more often I find it in places sacred to my soul: in the natural world, in the company of a trustworthy friend, in solitary or shared silence, in the ambience of [candlelight], a good poem or good music.

Sanctuary is wherever I find safe space to regain my bearings, reclaim my soul, heal my wounds, and return to the world as a wounded healer. It's not merely about finding shelter from the storm: it's about spiritual survival. It's where we remember who we are, and find rest and strength for the journey ahead.<sup>vi</sup>

Yes, on a personal level, sanctuary is where we perform the job of taking care of our soul. What is the rhythm we need in our lives at this time in order to stop and rest? And where might it be? For each of us this will be in a different place but it's important to find it. To give ourselves a Sabbath. In the story of Creation, God took time for this, it would be generative and generous for each of us to do the same.

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Now we might think all the references in the Hebrew Scriptures don't apply to sanctuary as we see it today, the place where we are safe, find community, are held, tell our story, and create relationships. But let's take another look. While still in the desert, God directed Moses, "And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them." This legacy is shared by the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, whose core is compassion and hospitality. As mentioned earlier, in the wilderness this sanctuary was the tent of meeting and in the time of Solomon it was the Temple of Jerusalem which held the Ark of the Covenant in its sanctuary which literally meant "Holy of Holies." But when the temple was destroyed, the sanctuary continued.

In liberal Protestant traditions, the word "sanctuary" is frequently used to refer to the entire worship area, as in our church. But in more traditional Western Christian traditions including Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, and Anglican churches, the area around the altar is called the sanctuary. This is true as well for the Eastern Orthodox, Byzantine, and Coptic traditions where the sanctuary is separated from the outer worship space by a wall of icons, with three doors in it.<sup>vii</sup>

Over the centuries, churches themselves have been considered sanctuaries with the early Christian churches having been built on sacred ground where a miracle or martyrdom was believed to have taken place or where a holy person was buried, one example being St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. And today we not only have sanctuary cities – Berkeley, Oakland, and Alameda being ones – but refugees are seeking shelter in churches once again.

What is consistent about the ways in which sanctuary has appeared in places of worship is the belief that in and through such sanctuaries God is present. However, I'd like to suggest that *wherever* we find sanctuary the Source of Life *dwells* among and within us. It is any time when our deepest self is heard. I don't mean to disregard the important role the Ark of the Covenant and priests played in Ancient Israel or the Ark where the Torah resides today in a Jewish Synagogue. What I do want to suggest is that God may not only be there but wherever we connect with the Mystery and the Oneness of Creation: the shelter, haven, refuge, stronghold, rock, and shield where we feel safe. This may be in the mountains, by the ocean, in a science laboratory, listening to or performing music, sitting with candlelight, reading poetry, or being welcomed into a local restaurant with its doors open to the needy. And right here at Northbrae sanctuary might be found not only on Sundays but in meditation on a Monday, with a support group where we can share laughter and tears together, in the office when someone walks in off the street and finds a listening ear, or at one of the countless AA meetings which sometimes sound like a party filled with joy.

Yes, we hunger to belong. It is a hunger that stems from a deep place in our innermost self yearning for connection, from a restlessness longing for a place where we can truly rest in peace. This is the gift of sanctuary where we feel fully known.

A couple of months ago, a close friend posted a video on Facebook of a pileated woodpecker who was holding on tight to a bird feeder in the midst of a raging blizzard and 40 mph winds. The feeder was swinging violently but that woodpecker held on. The birdfeeder was the woodpecker's sanctuary in the midst of that storm. There are times when we find ourselves buffeted by the storms of our life and we search for sanctuary where we find refuge, spread our battered wings, and once more feel loved just the way we are.

So now I give you the words of Max Ehrmann who tells us:

You are a child of the universe,  
no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,  
whatever you conceive Him to be,  
and whatever your labors and aspirations,  
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. <sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Ali Tadayan, "Salute E Vita Bids a 'Bittersweet' Goodbye," *The Journal*, Friday July 13, 2018, 1,7.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening* (Boston, MA: Conari Press, 2000), 204.

<sup>iii</sup> John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 107.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/53994-the-first-duty-of-love-is-to-listen>

<sup>v</sup> Aliani's poem was shared at the "Sustaining the Courage to Serve" Retreat, Circles of Trust, April 19-21, 2018.

<sup>vi</sup> Parker Palmer, "Seeking Sanctuary in our Own Sacred Spaces," *On Being*, <https://onbeing.org/blog/seeking-sanctuary-in-our-own-sacred-spaces/>

<sup>vii</sup> "Sanctuary," *Wikipedia*.

<sup>viii</sup> Max Ehrmann, "Desiderata."