

Sermon
8 Pentecost—Proper 11-B
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
July 18, 2021
William Bradbury

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Is there a special church you've been in that seems to be filled with the Presence of God?

I've always felt that Presence in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, but the place that I feel God the strongest is in the abbey church at the Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit, in Conyers, GA, just east of Atlanta.

Though very different in size, both churches offer a tourist a place filled with light, symbols of faith, and most of all, beautiful empty space. **The quality of the space is not all cluttered with stuff and noise, so the soul can lift out of her inner clutter of disappointments, fears, and expectations, and soar into the empty space of peace and Presence.**

That is, **IF** we take the time to sit quietly for a few minutes, putting down the phone and the brochure, and just be—letting our eyes soften and our hearts open to enter into a relaxed, prayerful state of calm centeredness that can be picked up on an EEG as the brain moves from Beta to Alpha waves.

But often we're too busy on the inside to take the time to enter into the beauty of empty space, because we're already behind schedule "with miles to go", if we want to do everything on our list. So, we take a bunch of pictures with our phones and head to the next place—like the bookstore or the coffee shop.

By the way, I have good reason to know that both Washington Cathedral and the monastery have excellent bookstores!

Of course, there are beautiful spaces that can free the soul from her clutter that have nothing to do with church buildings. The mountains do it for some, the ocean or lake for others.

You'll remember a verse from John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High":
 "Now he walks in quiet solitude the forest and the streams
 Seeking grace in every step he takes
 His sight has turned inside himself to try and understand
 The serenity of a clear blue mountain lake."

But again, one key requirement is not only the quality of the space we're in, but the quality of the space in us. If our inner space is filled with hurry and cyber noise, we will not sense God in the holiest church or the grandest national park.

 This is as true for the apostles as it is for us, so Jesus listens closely to their report on their first mission without him—you know, the one where they **DIDN'T** take a backpack filled with food, money, and clothes, just in case God didn't come through for them.

Mark says: "The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they" had done and taught" as they healed the sick and proclaimed the arrival of the Realm of God in Jesus.

But Jesus knows this kind of work is hard and that their souls are frayed and frazzled, so he says, **"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves."**

Even with Jesus right there, they need to rest their souls in Presence.

 Summer hopefully is about finding the space both in our calendars and in our souls to rest, to **re-create as we recreate**, so we can open to the Presence all around us.

In the disciples' case, they couldn't rest because the people found them and the work of ministry starts up again. Vacation would have to wait.

For me, the problem with every vacation is I always take along MYSELF with its busy voice in the head full of disappointments, desires, and fears.

 And even after the greatest vacation, the assault on our soul begins anew, as we fill up with inner noise, and we forget to open ourselves to the many spaces in our lives, which are filled with Presence.

In fact, there are NO SPACES that are not filled with God, but until we learn how to see God in the obvious spaces, we will miss God hiding in plain sight in the unexpected ones.

Therefore, it is necessary that we practice that kind of soulful seeing:

The patron saint for parish clergy, the 19th century French Catholic Saint Jean Vianney, tells the story of an old farmer who would regularly spend an hour a day sitting in the empty parish church in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the tiny French village of Ars. Saint Jean asked the farmer what he said to the Lord during those times of just sitting in church and the farmer said, **"I don't say anything. I just look at him and he looks at me."**

 So a question for us today is: **where and how do we practice seeing God in our daily lives?**

One woman I know practices being open to Presence as she walks her dog in the woods. Others practice by praying the psalms, reading the Bible, or Centering Prayer. Others experience it through painting, woodworking, journaling, reading, exercising, gardening, doing yard work, cooking, or playing with their kids.

There is no end to the possibilities, because there is NO PLACE where God isn't active in love. NO PLACE.

Paul even makes the radical claim that it's not just the church building that is filled with God, but it is the community of believers who are in fact the Temple of God.

Paul writes to the Ephesians this morning: "We are members of the household of God...and that In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom we also are built together in the Spirit into **a dwelling place for God.**"

We are the dwelling place for God!

Therefore, worship is not just something we do an hour a week sitting in hard pews—worship is an attitude of openness to God who is present in us and in all creation.

 John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High" begins this way: **He was born in the summer of his 27th year/Coming home to a place he'd never been before.**

It reminds us of the T. S. Eliot line from Four Quartets:

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

This is Christ’s work in us. This is Christ’s work for us.

And this is Christ’s invitation day by day to reach out our hands to touch him that we might come home to ourselves in God.

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Here is the information you requested:
Christopher & Elecia Miller
July 21
20th anniversary