

A Holy Corner  
Psalm 46; Matthew 6:1-8  
August 29, 2021

We just returned from vacation, and it got me thinking about vacations in the past. Several years ago we visited family back east, and decided to take a trip down memory lane in Western Maryland where I grew up. Of course, we *had to* go to our favorite restaurant about 30 minutes north of my hometown! It is the Penn Alps restaurant and Artisan Village in Grantsville, MD, and area that has a large Mennonite population. It is part of what makes the restaurant and village unique.

Now aside from the fact that our 30+ years of marriage could be characterized as a chronology of great restaurants from coast to coast, the Penn Alps truly is a treat for body, mind and spirit. It was organized over 40 years ago by a professor and friend I knew from college. I always come away feeling “fed,” and I don’t think it’s just due to the great food and rich desserts.

Next to the restaurant is the Artisan Village, where you witness a way of life that was common over a century and a half ago. Among the various buildings in the village was a one room school house, a black smith quarters, a candle making house, woodcarving, weaving, and a simple church, among others.

The cabins were reflective of the Mennonite way of life – simple and conducive to a spiritual life. There was nothing ostentatious or unnecessary about it. Perhaps the most interesting building is the Yoder House. It was an older house that was reconstructed as it would have been in the mid-to late 1800’s.

Many houses of that era had what was known as a “Holy Corner” in one room of the house. The Holy Corner was a special area of the house where the Bible, special papers and books were kept. The space was often used for weddings, funerals and other sacred occasions. Family church services and prayer gatherings were often held there as well. The space eventually became known as the holy corner because of its usage. There is an actual picture of the house we visited on the cover of the bulletin this morning. It made me think about the value of setting aside some sacred space that is used regularly in our own house for time alone with God, for prayer, reflection and writing.

ii

Many things are different today in the post-modern world. Everybody leads a busy, active life. There are also many distractions. We expect to be entertained, have modern conveniences, and count on our cars to take us places. Gone are the days when families gathered around the radio as oil lamps cast a shadow on the wall. Gone are the days

when people would take a horse and buggy to church, though my wife would just love it if she were able to ride a horse to church!

I am reminded of a time when people spent most of Sunday at church between worship, fellowship dinners, and prayer meetings. It was not uncommon for people to spend 8-10 hrs at church on Sunday, at least there I grew up. It was an all-day affair.

What does all of this mean for our spiritual development and sense of sacred space? How about you? Do you have something like a holy corner in your house or any place else in your life? Perhaps we would think of it today as a quiet space to read and reflect. You don't have to be like Henry David Thoreau with a cabin on Walden Pond to have a special place in your house for prayerful meditation or journal writing.

In our house, the guest room has been turned into a lovely, simple room that is bright and spacious, with a quilt, some wall hangings and a couple candles. It is a quiet, inviting place if either my wife or myself want to get away to read, pray or just be alone. I hope you have a place like that in your house.

I just returned from several days in a cabin on the east side of the Sierras. When I wasn't outdoors, which was much of the time, I found a quiet corner in the cabin to do quite a bit of journal writing.

### iii

Jesus often took time out of a busy life and ministry in order to pray and be alone with his heavenly father. He knew it was a necessity. He withdrew to a quiet place to pray – a friend's house, a boat on the lake or a mountaintop, or a garden, among other places. He knew that without such a regular practice, it would be impossible to have a vital ministry.

But Jesus also warned that we should pray with humility and with genuine desire to communicate with God. Keep it simple in terms of both where and how you pray. He warned in today's lesson not to pray like the Gentiles or Pharisees:

5 ". . . whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to God in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:5-6

When you go into your room and close the door, I hope you have a "holy corner" where you can go to pray and be alone with God -- a place that is away from the phone, the door bell, the computer, and the other demands of a busy day. Even if you don't have a

physical place right now where you can go regularly to be alone with God, I hope there is a daily time in your life where you can encounter the holiness of God in everyday life.

Which brings me to a second point – in addition to having a holy place, expect to have a holy encounter with God. Prayer is not primarily about using the right words or asking for things, but rather entering into communion with God, and providing a space for God to speak.

Preacher and writer Craig Barnes writes concerning prayer: We have so many questions about prayer, but what we mostly want to know is, “Does prayer work? Does it really change things? The answer to that question is a resounding YES, but mostly what prayer changes is the person who is praying.” That is because in prayer, we enter into the presence of God, and we cannot do that without being changed. Dramatically.

“When we pray for others, we place them into the presence of God, in which they are also confronted with the possibility of change. Prayer changes the very person you are praying for, and they might not even know it. It isn't only that our prayers are powerful. When we pray we place ourselves in God's magnificent hands.” (M. Craig Barnes, Does Prayer Matter?)

Now, that does not mean that we will always receive what we ask for in prayer. Sometimes, no matter how hard we pray, a loved one dies. Sometimes you pray for your kids or grandchildren, they grow up and break your heart. But we can place everything in God's hands, admitting that, “God, we know your ways are not our ways. Help us to understand your will and plan for our lives.”

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When it comes to prayer, it's best to keep it simple. Don't worry about getting all the words right, for the real goal of prayer is to be transformed in the presence of God. Anne Lamott in her book, Traveling Mercies writes that she really has only two prayers, but she uses them all the time. Her first prayer is, “Help me. Help me. Help me.” The second is, “Thank you. Thank You. Thank You.” --Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, p. 82. Those are not bad prayers when it comes to the bottom line.

Finally, God has A Holy Purpose for your life. So I have talked about a place, a purpose and a plan. God has called each one of us to a life and purpose that can only be known through prayer and communion with God. How can you get somewhere if you don't have a roadmap? After a while when you pray, you begin to see that your prayers along with those of other Christians are changing the world one person and one prayer at a time. Like any good habit, prayer takes practice and discipline. I also like to spend time meditating. Soon you will be reminded that there is no where you can go where God is not present.

Every moment is holy, and everything in your life is a sacrament. You begin to see God at work everywhere. When we enter the room of prayer – be it in our hearts or in our homes – we may think that we are waiting on God to give us what we want – whether it be healing, a happier relationship or a new job. But when God whispers to us, we discover that we were waiting for the wrong thing. We might settle for small, comfortable dreams, because our prayers have not yet been transformed by the plans and dreams of God.

The Spirit may come to you and whisper something in your ear you were not expecting. Are you open to a different answer? It's not about getting what *we* want, but about becoming what God wants for us. A person first experiences God's love and grace, and then becomes God's instrument in order to bring it to others.

Craig Barnes, once again speaking about prayer and God's transforming power, writes:

“None of the great leaders of the church ever aspired to greatness. Rather, they aspired to know God and were determined to wait with their thirsty souls upon the Holy Spirit in prayer. . . The greatness came not from their gifts and skills, but from the power of the Spirit at work in empty vessels. Emptying is one of the first things that happens in God's plan – but only so that we can be filled.”

--M. Craig Barnes, Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of Our Longings, pp. 117-118.

Someone once said, “Only those who love enough to pray, only those who hope enough to pray, only those who trust enough to pray can be stewards of Gods creation.” May you have a holy encounter in a holy place today where you experience God in the ordinary details of everyday life, and may you discover God's holy purpose for your life through the transforming power and grace that only God can provide.

Make room for prayer, and you make room for God. You just might find God in a corner, and a holy corner at that. AMEN.

**Psalm 46**

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. 6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. 10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

**Matthew 6:1-8**

1 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7 "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.