"Spiritual Sanctuary"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Yesterday, I hosted brunch for a group of alumni from Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian college outside of Chicago that I attended for undergrad. As a non-denominational college, our religious backgrounds varied from Pentecostal to Presbyterian. And yet, what we all shared was an experience of a growing up within a context of religious conservatism. It was a context that emphatically declared same-sex love to not only be wrong but denounced 'homosexuality' as sin that would send you to hell. At Wheaton, to be 18 and gay or 20 and questioning was a very hard place to be. It still is.

But, year after year, gay students live and love on campus. And, too often, they live in fear or shame. Fear of being found out. Fear that the professors and preachers are right—that they deserve to go to hell for what they feel. As a straight woman, I did not have this struggle and, frankly, was not aware of the students who were struggling. But very soon after I graduated, I befriended openly gay and lesbian folks. And very quickly, my ideas about what was right and wrong changed. Without knowing the word, I became an ally.

Which is how I came to be hosting brunch yesterday for the Boston area LGBTQ alum and allies. We were not a big group—just eight of us encircled around the dining room table. Although we were strangers, we understood that we were in a group of persons who would accept us however we identified.

Writing on our longing for community, the author Starhawk writes,

> We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free. (#36, *Lifting Our Voices*)

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In those few hours yesterday, eight strangers became a community in which stories flowed freely and heads nodded in compassion and understanding. As some named decades old pain, healing was found.

Listening, I said to them, "This feels like a moment of sanctuary."

But, what *is* 'sanctuary'? In that moment, sanctuary was an experience of refuge from the condemnations of their being. The space of safety and acceptance became a counterpoint to experiences of fear and danger. Sanctuary became a place of healing and renewal.

I think that we all inevitably find ourselves in need of sanctuary. We can become depleted by life. As thinking, feeling, physical persons, engaging with the world can tax our limited resources of energy and understanding.

When the world feels like too much and your energy feels insufficient, where do you turn to replenish yourself? Do you have a particular place you go to—a spot in the woods or in the corner of your backyard. Or, do you head to the yoga studio or out for a run? Do you retreat to a quiet corner in the house with a book or to your studio or shop to work on a project? Or, rather than retreat to solitude, do you seek out a crowd—longing to be amidst a group of people to sing together, to watch the game, or to swap stories?

We all have our limits. The demands of life inevitably wear us down. Especially in a fast-paced, fragmented world saturated with nonstop news cycles, simply getting through the day can be exhausting. So, when you are feeling worn . . . where do you turn for sanctuary?

Rooted in the Latin word *sanctus,* which means holy, the original meaning of sanctuary is a place for the holy—a place like a temple, shrine, or church. For those who sought refuge within the walls of a church or temple from criminal prosecution, the idea of sanctuary became associated with the idea of safety. This idea even extended to the idea of animal sanctuaries—places to protect wildlife from the dangers of habitat loss and hunting.

And yet, all of these meanings trace back to the idea of a space for the holy, for the sacred, for the eternal and ultimate. They trace back to a sense of spiritual sanctuary—to places that ground us in what is true and good and right.

Author Terry Hershey counsels, "We are wired to need grounding and renewal . . . I can tell the weeks when I do not get my recommended dose of sanctuary—or, in my case, garden time. And I can tell when I do take my sanctuary time because it restores me."

There does seem to be a hard-wired need for renewal and restoration—although where and when we find sanctuary will inevitably vary. We seem to need time and space when we're not looking over our shoulder in fear or wrestling to keep up with our

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responsibilities. We need time and space to attend to our emotional life, our inner life, our spiritual life. We need times and spaces of sanctuary.

I imagine some of you may be hearing this as, "oh great, something else I should be doing. Eat healthy, exercise, and take time for sanctuary. I'll just add that to the list…" But, what if it's not yet another *should.* What if it's a kind of *permission* to simply be what you are—a person in need of inner, emotional, and spiritual renewal. Just like we don't exactly have the option to breath, to eat, or to sleep, what if we in fact don't have the option to need renewal?

Consider what it would be like to *not* have moments and places of sanctuary. Unfortunately, examples are not rare. There is little sanctuary in war zones where battle lines too often creep into areas of noncombatants. And, sanctuary can feel elusive to people in moments of crises, such as those struggling in the aftermath of hurricanes like Florence or Matthew.

Amidst the many stories of danger and violence that pour into our news feeds, one story in particular caught my attention this week. In a school in Stafford, Virginia, a middle school conducted a safety drill to practice how to respond during events such as an active shooter. The students in the PE class were directed to take shelter in the locker rooms. Although this was a safety drill and no students would be changing clothes, the students were nonetheless separated by gender to enter the boys' and the girls' locker rooms. That is all the students except for one transgender student. This student was made to sit first with a teacher in the gym and then alone in the hall to the locker rooms.

A Facebook statement by the group "Equality Stafford" stated, "Let me be clear. During an event that prepares children to survive an attack by actual assailants, she was treated as if she was so much of a danger to peers that she was left exposed and vulnerable." Seen as a danger, she was denied sanctuary with the other students. Without this (relative) protection, she was far more likely to suffer actual violence and danger. Denial of sanctuary can have very real consequences.

But aren't I talking about two different things? On the one hand, there is the sense of sanctuary as a space of renewal and restoration. And, on the other hand, there is the sense of sanctuary as a space of safety and protection. I wonder if there is not a connection between the two?

When I think about the space of sanctuary around my dining room table yesterday, the experience of healing and renewal emerged only because it felt like a space of safety and protection. To feel a sense of renewal, perhaps we need to find times and places in which we do not feel dangerously exposed.

There *are* all kinds of dangers in this world. Some of these dangers are physical, such as active shooters in a school or howling winds in a hurricane. And, some of these dangers are spiritual, such as being made to feel shame for who you are as a transgender girl or a gay college student. Navigating these dangers to our body and our spirit takes a toll on us. We

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need times and spaces where we can relax for a moment, take stock of where we are, and remember what really matters.

For many of us, coming to services like this *is* an experience of sanctuary. Within these historic walls, we rest upon the pews as we find comfort in the familiar rhythm of a Sunday morning with its flow of music and words. In the ancient sense, we come here hoping to reconnect with a sense of the holy—to be reminded of what still remains as worthy of our devotion and attention within a world that would shatter our focus into a million pieces.

And I hope that we do find this experience of sanctuary here. We need spaces of renewal and I want this to be one of those spaces of renewal—and of feeling safely included.

But we also leave here each week. We turn to the doors and receive a benediction beckoning us to take what we have received in this sanctuary beyond these walls. In this way, our experience of sanctuary here is not a *retreat* from the world, but a *refueling* to go back out and keep on living in a world that can be depleting and dangerous.

Knowing this, we can intentionally make the space and time for sanctuary, for renewal, for sitting on the porch swing, or for being in communities in which we feel free and safe. And, knowing the importance of sanctuary, we can also be advocates for those in need of safe spaces of refuge.

Wherever and however you may find sanctuary, may you seek it out again and again so that you remain rooted to the holy—to what really matters. There is much in this life that threatens us and depletes us. And, there are things like beauty and love that can restore us. By choosing to pursue sanctuary in our own lives and to protect spaces of safe refuge for others, we can stay better connected to what is good and worthwhile.

So may it be,
Amen.

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