

Lent 3  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

March 3, 2024  
Rev. Paul Moore

## Sacred Spaces

These are excerpts from our parish history as listed on our website:

*The first Episcopal service in Mount Vernon was conducted in 1891 by The Rev. L.W. Applegate at the Methodist church. Following this service the Women's Guild of St. Paul's Mission was formed to raise money for church needs. St. Paul's was selected as the name for the mission because one of the founders, Mrs. A.M. Moore, had been a member of St. Paul's in Camden, New Jersey. After occupying several temporary sites, the mission opened its first church building on 2nd Street. The chancel furniture, communion plate and altar linen were presented to the new mission by St. Paul's, Camden New Jersey. In 1896, the building was moved to a large lot on the southeast corner of 3rd and Kincaid and later, the son of The Rev. F.C. Eldred built a large parish hall.*

*During the 35-year tenure of The Rev. William Forbes (1946-80), money was raised to purchase the land on 18th St. where the current church sits today. On June 17, 1960, the new church was consecrated by Bishop William F. Lewis.*

*St. Paul's partner congregation, La Iglesia de la Resurrección, began in 1998 as a ministry in migrant farm worker camps. The congregation was invited to meet at St. Paul's and at Pentecost 2003, held its first Eucharist there with The Rev. Josefina Beecher. The following year, they moved their office to St. Paul's.*

What is not listed is that the Altar from the original St. Paul's on 2nd St. is now sitting in the back of the Nave. At first, Resurrección worshiped in the Fireside Room, as we call it, using that old Altar. Now it serves as an altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe. She is always festooned with fresh flowers. Prayer candles are arranged around her feet, and a basin of Holy Water always rests before her. If you come at 11:30, you will see her visited by members of Resurrección. Someone recently asked me why she gets flowers in Lent and the High Altar does not. I suggested the asker ask one of the members of Resurrección, and I know that conversation happened.

But I took it a step further. At a potluck last week, I passed out pieces of paper and pencils, and asked people to write down what Guadalupe means to them. Their responses, translated when needed into English, are posted on the Altar on cardstock. I

invite you to peruse them.

I make that invitation because sometimes our understanding of Sacred Space goes a bit nocturnal. We don't think about it much, we just respond to it, and it sinks out of sight into our sub-consciousness, until something different catches our attention and invites us to reconsider.

This is OUR sacred space, this building here, with its history of prayer and service. But it is Resurrección's as well. Culture forms how we understand, and therefore arrange, sacred space. I think it fitting that the original St. Paul's Altar now invites members of another culture to express their own spiritual sacred space by it. Would it be too much to call it a bridge between two congregations?

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus calls back into consciousness Sacred Space that had slipped from view. The existence of the market itself is not the issue. The market of animals to be sacrificed is provided for in the book of Deuteronomy. In it the Law provides for travelers not to have to bring a sacrificial animal with them, but to be able to purchase one on arrival. The money changers in and of themselves were not the issue. Rome insisted on coinage that bore the likeness of the emperor on it. Considered idolatrous by the Jews, the Temple minted its own. A good Jew prayed the temple tax to support the ministry of the great institution, but it must be paid in currency that was not idolatrous. Whether or not those practices had become extortionary is not part of the story, really, though many believe they had.

What is at issue with Jesus is WHERE the market was taking place. It had migrated over the years closer and closer to the door, until it was within the temple precincts themselves. Jesus declares to the merchants, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Why is this an issue? What happens in a market place? I take my chicken to sell, and I sell her for enough to buy something else I need. In my heart, the money in my pocket is more valuable than the chicken, The purchaser of my chicken has exactly the opposite set of values. But you notice who it's all about—me. I am doing what I can to address my needs. This is important, for Jesus commands us to love ourselves, but ultimately, it's ego-centered, which on the collective level, is ethno-centric.

Sacred Space is very different. In sacred space I learn to reach deeper than my ego to my spirit, that part of me that knows how to see, know and love the one who is other for who they are. Collectively, when we enter sacred space with another people, we learn to reach beyond the boundaries of our ethnocentrism to see, know and love another people for who they are.

This is how we build sacred, beloved community, where the center is not me or even my

tribe, but us, and the space between us in which we come to know the risen Christ.

This building, this sacred space. Is home to the community that descends from those first few in 1891, and even though the place is elsewhere, it is still the same community who gathers. Over the years, this hall has become hallowed by our collective prayers as again and again, we have known the risen Christ among us and in the breaking of the bread. The prayers of Resurrección have added to that hallowing now for 21 years.

But I would warrant that this is not your only sacred space. Sacred spaces are those places where we meet Jesus. Someone dear to me recently wrote of being caught in traffic while a homeless man with two shopping carts one in front of him and one behind, struggled to cross the street on a motorized wheel-chair. After a furious conversation with God, she pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store he was obviously headed for. Not real steady on her own feet, she nonetheless, helped the man finish his crossing and get onto level ground by the store. He introduced himself as "John, as in the author of Revelations." Her late husband was named John. "People steal stuff from me a lot," he said. It's OK, I survive."

Before she left, he withdrew from his stuff a beautiful throw. It had been given to him, and he couldn't bear to think it might get stolen—so he gave it to her instead! She met Jesus in the most unlikely of places. She was comforted by unexpected community with a man who bore her late husband's name, and challenged at the same time to be true to the Christ between them.

Just like Jesus was in the Father's House he loved, so sacred spaces comfort us in that they affirm truths that are always and everywhere true, like our common humanity, our common faith and our common call. Just as Jesus cleared out the market from the Temple, so sacred spaces require putting our egos in their proper places rather than letting them run the show like in the market and most of life. Sacred spaces require us to pull back the mantle of dominance that White culture exercises in our society, to allow room for others to be who they are.

Sacred spaces are those places where we meet Jesus' people. Many years ago, I was gathered with a number of believers, many of which belong to the Dine tribe, called by outsiders, Navajo. Dine people were in charge, I was just a guest. A man stood up to sing a song. He sang a song that was probably composed by enslaved people in the 1750's in Virginia, who had been exposed to the evangelistic efforts of Samuel Davis, *Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart*.

Now I know that song, and I have heard and sung it many times. I imagine it sung slowly, in a base voice, with pauses that call forth the deep emotion of the prayer. This man sang it in a tenor voice, accompanying himself on the guitar, at a fast tempo, and without the pauses I expected. At first, I didn't like it—until it hit me: I am not Dine, I

am on the outside looking in. This is how this Dine man chooses to express this sentiment by means of this song. Who am I to say that this was no less heart-felt than the first black slaves who intoned it?

In the back, on the original St. Paul's Altar, is a Sacred Space. It comforts, because it is the old Altar from this church, but it challenges by its different use. Gone are the expected tables for changing our images of idols into our ideas of value. Gone are the sacrificial liturgical forms we prefer, expect, or even demand. They have been swept away by Jesus to make room for Sacred Space.

This space invites us into another world, one full of other Jesus-people, who have different customs and who hold to different values and assumptions. What might Jesus look like in that world? Jesus is there, too, to be sure. If you enter gently, humbly, and with a heart full of holy curiosity, you may just glimpse him.