

Standing on Holy Ground

Sermon for October 8, 2017

Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church

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I am doing something today that I have never done before. Maybe some of you have noticed already, and wondered what on earth your minister is thinking, being barefoot in church.

In worship last week, we began our exploration of our first Source, the “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

The reading last Sunday began with these words: “Moses encountered a Burning Bush and took off his shoes to honor the sacred ground he stood upon.” That was a reference to Exodus Chapter 3, verses 4 and 5, which read:

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

The place on which you are standing is holy ground. That's a powerful idea, but I'm going to change the wording just a little to make it more inclusive: the place where you are is holy ground.

I have a friend and colleague who routinely preaches barefoot, to remind herself that when she stands before a congregation, she is on holy ground. Although I typically do wear shoes while preaching, I am aware, too, that as our opening words said, "we meet on holy ground." I feel it every time I walk into our sanctuary. The church, this building, is a treasure, a historical and architectural delight, though not without its challenges. It's not the building's beauty alone that makes it holy ground, though; it is the people of the congregation—past and present and future—who make this sacred space, and it is that holiness which I acknowledge today with my bare feet.

More specifically, it's the intention with which we come together in this space that makes it holy. It's not the same feeling as if the same group of us gathered at a restaurant or a football game or book club. We have set this space aside for something that is more than just social or intellectual. When we gather in this space, particularly for worship but hopefully also in

the rest of congregational life, our intentions are focused on something larger than ourselves.

The linguistic root of the word worship is “worth-ship”—acknowledgment of worth. When we gather to worship, we gather to lift up what is of worth to us. That is, at a minimum, our shared values and our aspirations for a better world. For many of us, it is also the divine, however we may define that.

It’s not the location that matters—any space can be sacred if we make it so by our intentions. This is why it is possible to feel a sense of the sacred not only in a beautiful historic church building like this one, but also in a modern church with a very different look from ours, in a field or at the Cathedral of the Pines when we gather for outdoor worship, or in a rented storefront, hotel conference room, or even someone’s living room used as a church by a small fellowship.

The Book of Matthew, Chapter 18 Verse 20 reads, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Although our theology,

our reason for gathering, is not centered on Christ, the underlying message is the same. The passage from Matthew depends upon the phrase “in my name”—it is the purpose of the two or three gathering that brings Jesus among them, and it is the purpose with which we gather that brings the divine here to this place and makes this holy ground.

Those intentions also appear outside of worship; I would tell you that Community Supper makes the dining room holy ground. Teaching our children the tenets of our faith makes our classrooms holy ground.

Connecting in community makes our Parish Hall holy ground, whether it is being used for coffee hour, for a music event, for yoga, or for an AA meeting. The work our staff does to sustain this congregation makes our offices holy ground. If we bring the right intention to it, remembering that we are a congregation and not simply a non-profit organization, the work of the congregation makes our conference rooms holy ground.

The place where you are is holy ground.

Before I was even familiar with the Exodus passage about Moses removing his sandals, I felt an instinctive urge to take off my shoes and feel certain holy ground beneath my feet. When I was earning a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Naropa University, both students and faculty read their work at events in the Performing Arts Center. Many famous writers have graced that stage, and each time I entered that space, whether as a spectator or a reader, I felt a sense of awe that I was literally following in their footsteps. I instinctively thought about going on stage barefoot, but was hesitant to break the rules I'd been taught about proper dress for public events, which definitely included keeping my shoes on, so at the time I dismissed the urge as silly. But I longed to feel the wood of that stage on the soles of my feet, to make contact with my own body with the place so many writers I admired had performed their work.

The place where you are is holy ground.

I invite you now, if you are comfortable doing so, to take your own shoes off. Let your feet feel the boards of the pew floor, of this place where so many Unitarian Universalists (and before merger, Unitarians) have come

together in worship. Then, if you are willing, close your eyes. Imagine your feet touching not the floor, but the earth upon which this building rests.

The place where you are is holy ground.

This weekend, many of us celebrate Indigenous People's Day on what has traditionally been Columbus Day weekend; many cities have made the change official, and many Unitarian Universalist congregations also honor the indigenous people rather than colonizing forces on this weekend. As we think about sacred space, let's pause to remember that this ground, the ground on which our church rests, was holy ground long before Europeans reached these shores and long before Unitarians built this church on it. Before we were here, the land now known as southern New Hampshire was the home of the Pennacook people, sometimes also called the Merrimack people; the northern portion of the state was home to the Abenaki people, into which the Pennacooks merged after being decimated by disease following European settlement. As with indigenous people the world over, the land (all land) on which the Pennacook lived is and was sacred in its own right, not because of what humans did there.

We all came from indigenous people somewhere—and I believe all of our ancestors experienced that sense of connection to the land, of the sacredness of the earth that provided food and shelter and water. I believe we carry some piece of that reverence still within us, even if we grew up in cities, with pavement as our most common walking ground rather than dirt or gravel or sand. I believe something in us is still primed to feel reverent when we stand in old growth forest, or at the ocean shore or the shore of a lake so large we can't see the other side, or at the base of a waterfall. Perhaps we even feel reverent when we dig in our gardens or hear a barred owl calling from the trees in our backyards.

Sometimes, however, human activity is what makes a place holy.

For years, I've been working on a writing project, one poem at a time, that I think of with the working title *Pilgrimages*. It has two sections, or perhaps is a two-volume series—*Pilgrimages to Sacred Places*, and *Pilgrimages to Sites of Trauma and Healing*.

I've mentioned before, when giving an overview of our first Source, that as a young adult I experienced awe and wonder in places designated as holy by a variety of traditions. Pagan circles, some of stone and some of wood, dotting the landscape of Great Britain. Cathedrals in France. Mosques in Turkey. Ancient temples to a pantheon of gods and goddesses in Egypt. Each unique and beautiful, and each with the same underlying sense of holiness. Each evoking the same reaction in me—an inclination to walk gently on the sacred ground, to be silent in the space, to be reverent. If I could have gone barefoot, I would have.

Religion is not a required component for sacred space, however. For example, the Performing Arts Center at Naropa was a secular space made holy to many of us by the writers who were there before us. There is also holy ground wherever trauma has occurred—Las Vegas, Oklahoma City, Ground Zero in New York, Dachau, Wounded Knee, etc. Places where terrible things happened, where lives were lost, and often, where people have made pilgrimages to mourn and to remember and to memorialize the lost.

Some places are sanctified by what happens there, by the emotional and spiritual residue that lingers. Some of us feel it viscerally, experience it as a need to walk barefoot, to drop to our knees in prayer, to remain silent in the face of the unspeakably powerful or the just plain unspeakable.

Have you ever experienced that?

Let's look back at the words of our first source; you can find them two pages before Hymn 1 in your hymnal if you want to follow along.

“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

Have your experiences of sacred places, whether in nature or in human-built structures, opened you to the holy, to the forces that create and uphold life?

Humans are spiritual beings, whether or not we are religious, and place can evoke that natural spirituality.

Some definitions of spirituality have to do not with religion, but with the basic human need for deeper truth and meaning. We are, all of us, meaning-making creatures—some of us are more intentional about it than others, and we often end up studying philosophy or theology, but the abundance of mythologies and stories in cultures around the globe demonstrate that human beings like to find explanations for things.

The place where you are is holy ground.

What if we acted that way? Perhaps not by taking off our shoes, but by cultivating a sense of wonder and reverence for the place we are, and the people who have lived or died there, and the meaning it has held? How might our journey through the world be changed by this practice?

There's also a larger question here, one not directly tied to place but inspired by the Exodus passage: in our daily lives, what do we have to

remove to get closer to the holy, however we define that? Moses had to remove his sandals. Perhaps for us it's anxiety, or protective walls we've put up around ourselves, or too-busy schedules that keep us focused on tasks rather than experiences of the divine in the world around us.

The idea of intention, which I raised early in the sermon, may be the remedy for many of the things that get in our way. Taking a moment to figuratively remove our shoes—to set aside our routine thoughts or our worries or fears or defenses—can open us to experiences of awe and wonder, which in turn, our first Source tells us, open us to the forces that create and uphold life.

Those intentions can make any space sacred, and any time holy.

It is true: **wherever** you are, the place where you are is holy ground...if you make it so.

May we make it so.

Amen, and Blessed Be.