

Congregational Church of the Messiah

September 28, 2008

“Searching for the Sacred”

Ezekiel 44:23 and Jeremiah 31:33-34

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Billy Graham speaks of “a friend who during the Depression lost his job, a fortune, his wife, and a home, but he held onto his faith—the only thing he had left. One day he stopped to watch some men doing stonework on a huge church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of stone.

“What are you going to do with that?” asked the man.

“The workman said, “See that little opening away up there near the spire? Well, I’m shaping this down here, so it will fit in up there.”

Tears filled the man’s eyes as he walked away. It seemed as though God had spoken through this workman to explain the man’s ordeal through which he was passing. It seemed God was saying to him, “I am shaping you down here so you will fit in up here.”

We are all being shaped here on earth by what we choose to believe is sacred and how we choose to respond to the world “down here” where we live each day.

At the beginning of the 20th century, most people in America associated what was sacred with a particular house of worship—the Protestants in their churches, the Roman Catholics in their cathedrals, the Jewish in their synagogues and temples.

Traditions and customs also were taught to children and what was to be treated with respect and reverence because it was considered sacred by their particular religious tradition. In the late forties and through the fifties, those returning from the Second World War continued to build our country, our suburbs, and our cities. The communities valued their houses of worship.

Families were expected to support their chosen religious traditions. Many new churches and synagogues were built during that time, including this campus in Westchester for the Congregational Church of the Messiah starting in 1954 and continuing to build with the Oratorium added in 1963. Within these walls, the understanding of what was sacred and what was profane was taught to generation after generation. For many people what was sacred was the building and certain items that had been consecrated or dedicated for sacred use within the building: the Communion table and service, the Baptismal Font, the organ, the meetinghouse, especially the nave and chancel called the sanctuary.

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Over the years, the buildings were considered sacred because they especially were built to inspire, to instruct, to coordinate and provide space for God's people to learn and do God's Will. Gradually people began not to find inspiration so much within the walls of the buildings and sought inspiration elsewhere: in nature, in other forms of religious belief, or even in the secular world. They simply started ignoring the Church and its buildings altogether.

While they considered themselves still religious, generation after generation became increasingly caught up with pursuit of materialism. Media advertised how people could develop themselves and not need institutional religion at all. Freedom it said was doing one's own thing and being free from all the values and beliefs of organized religion. Aided by excessive media advertisements and a loss of family roots and values, young Americans became some of the best-educated citizens in the world and at the same time, some of the least loyal to any particular religious tradition.

They insisted that old phrases and sacred things were outdated. They struggled to find new terms and languages to describe their beliefs or lack of need for any. As they did so they became inattentive toward religious traditions; they increasingly became devoted to looking inward into themselves for meaning in life and largely ignored whatever might be considered sacred—except their freedom to do as they chose.

The Director of the Center of the Study of Religion at Princeton University writes in his book, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, "Spirituality has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks in his or her own way"...to create what he or she calls "a profound change in our spiritual practices during the last half of the twentieth century." (pages 2 and 3)

This does not mean that Americans do not recognize that within them there is sometimes an unexplainable and indefatigable spiritual quality, which drives them to continue to seek the sacred in order to understand and express their inner beliefs. Often the search uses bizarre and sometimes destructive means.

For the last thirty years, young Americans have been seeking a different expression of their relationship to the spirit of God within them. Established houses of worship have been hard pressed to acknowledge what was happening, let alone move to meet the new needs and searching of the younger generation.

Having built walls to shelter the sacred from the secular, many houses of worship built in the 50s and 60s became fortresses to protect what was inside from any changes no matter what they were.

As new generations grew up, fewer and fewer found personal meaning in those items their parents considered sacred and so turned elsewhere seeking spiritual expression. Religious movements sprung up. New mega churches began attracting those younger

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generations and traditional houses of worship, synagogues and temples continued worshipping as they always had with few major changes or additions to meet the spiritual seeking of the coming generations.

New patterns of searching for the sacred would emerge, flourish for a few years or decades then seem to meld back into society as yet another generation would find another expression, which would rise to provide meaning for a time and then pass on as well.

Meanwhile the media and secular society also continued to develop enticing ways to distract generations and redefine, even finally seeking to replace altogether anything once considered sacred and “off limits.”

Young searchers became caught up in their quest as they were guided down paths that destroyed their sense of balance and ability to discern between the profane and the sacred, the clean and the unclean, the desirable and the undesirable, the constructive and the destructive.

Few families have come through the last thirty years without some contact with a person or family member in search of personal meaning in life, which has included seeking the sacred outside the church.

Our scriptures this morning help bring some order to this ongoing disparity between the challenge of secular society and its claims opposed to God.

First: The sacredness of God and God’s creation is open to everyone. Just as there is air to breathe, God’s incredible love and desire to give fullness of life to each of His people is available at all times to everyone. God is faithful and will never forsake us.

Second: Because God placed the ability to receive and live with His sacredness within us, we will always be restless until we find and accept God’s incredible forgiveness and acceptance. We can never be completely self-sufficient. We were created to be at one with God in spirit.

In the past, God gave His people the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. Then over years, the prophets and priests added hundreds of other rules and regulations that people must follow to be right with God. Eventually, Jesus came to show us how to live with the love of God centered in our lives rather than hundreds of rules and regulations written and enforced by human beings.

That which was sacred for Jesus was determined not by sacrifices burned on altars in a temple or on a mountain but the opening of one’s spirit to God’s Spirit. Jesus taught us to worship God with all our heart, mind, and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as our self.

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What was unclean was to deny the existence of this inner spirit God had placed within us and renounce the beauty and holiness of each of God's creations. What God has created is not to be considered unclean.

We are to love those who are outcast, those whom society does not accept as having value, those who do not like us—even those who seek to tear us down. We are to depend on God's wisdom, love and power rather than on our own intelligence and strength.

The items that we shape or build here on earth are to be dedicated to God's use. They are to be used for sacred purposes so the power of God working through those items will bless those who use them and lead them to thank God.

Those who are baptized are blessed—not by the wood or water—but by the Spirit of the Living God touching their heart and soul; forgiving and receiving that person into a new and closer relationship with Him, their loving heavenly Father.

As we gather around the Communion table, we are blessed as the elements are consecrated in prayer and come into our bodies as a reminder of how God's Spirit is able to bring sacred use to ordinary things.

Next Sunday, October 5, is Worldwide Communion Sunday. We will be joining Christian churches in countries everywhere in remembering our Lord's Last Supper with his disciples on earth and how He consecrated the simple experience of eating bread and drinking wine giving it a personal and sacred dimension.

This world is far more than just what we can see and touch. It is the embodiment of God's creative love for life.

Let us joyfully keep searching, finding, and recognizing how God's sacredness touches us in the midst of our daily lives and then pass on some of that joy and peace to others whom we meet along life's way.

God is shaping us down here day by day so we will one day fit in heaven.

Amen.