

Finding Refuge: Sanctuary

March 1, 2020

Last week, on our trip to Paris, Chuck and I – as you might expect - visited museums. We sat quietly before Monet’s huge Water Lily panels at the Orangerie; enjoyed the glimpses of 19th century Parisian life offered by the paintings of Renoir, Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morrisot, and Monet at the Musee d’Orsay, and caught a glimpse of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. But we also visited two museums not on every tourist’s list: the Shoah Memorial and the Memorial to Martyrs of the Deportation.

Both museums remember and teach about Jewish life – and death - in France during the Second World War. As you probably know, in the spring of 1940 the German army invaded France. France surrendered and the Germans installed a puppet government, known for the new German-declared capital of Vichy. At first, Parisians - Jewish and Gentile - thought that things wouldn’t be too bad. They trusted Marshall Petain, the leader of the new government and a hero of the First World War to protect their nation. And the Jewish people, who had found refuge in France for centuries, thought they would be safe. Parisian Jews in the early 20th century prided themselves on being fully French. But they were wrong. France was not a sanctuary for them. The Vichy government joined the Germans in depriving Jews of the ability to go to school, hold jobs, or own businesses. Paintings and statues were taken away from those wealthy enough to own artwork.

Another museum in Paris, which we didn’t get to see, was the home of such a family. The Museum Nissim de Camondo was the home of Moise Camondo, part of a family of wealthy bankers who had come to Paris after persecution, first in Turkey and then in Italy. Moise had enough family wealth that he didn’t have to work in the family business. He collected art, built a large house on the outskirts of Paris to house his collection, and raised his two children, a son Nissim and a daughter Beatrice. After Nissim was killed fighting for France in the First World War, Moise dedicated himself to making his house a museum in memory of his son. When he died, he left the house and his art collection to the French nation. His daughter Beatrice used her inheritance to support the museum and other charitable causes, but her and her family’s generosity to the nation didn’t protect them. Beatrice, her husband, and their children were deported and killed in 1945. Beatrice had believed that her family’s legacy, her conversion to Catholicism, and her friends in high society would protect her, but France was not a sanctuary for her or her family. Despite all her efforts to fit in, in the end, she was not seen as a fellow human being but “an other.”

I read about Beatrice at the Memorial to Martyrs of the Deportation along with stories of ordinary people, who thought they were safe but were not. In the Shoah Museum there is a corridor completely covered with pictures of children who were deported and killed in the camps. As I looked at those pictures, I wondered how anyone could not see them as worthy of care and safety, but history tells us that many could blind themselves to their common humanity.

And history of course continues to tell us that. Just this week in this country the House passed a bill making lynching a federal crime. The bill is named for Emmett Till, a 14-year old boy, lynched by a mob in 1955. His youth and vulnerability did not protect him either. The color of his skin made him an other, unworthy of sanctuary.

And we see it still, on the border with families separated and children caged; with the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, a largely minority and poor community; with waste treatment centers and gas pipelines directed through poor and minority communities; in the lack of investigation when young Native women disappear and are found dead; in attacks on LGBTQ people; even in divisions among townies and newcomers here in Scituate. It is so easy to name people as other and declare them unworthy of the same care we offer those who are part of our tribe.

So the idea of sanctuary in many ways goes against our natural human inclinations. Sanctuary is an ideal we strive for. Our English word comes from the Latin word "Sanctuarium," from *sanctus*, holy, and *arium*, a container. As an aquarium contains *aqua*, water, a sanctuary contains *sancti*, the holy ones. So though we call the building the sanctuary, what is important, what is holy, is that which it holds. Us. We are what is holy here.

In a sanctuary we treat one another as worthy of care and respect. In traditional language, in a sanctuary we recognize each other as children of God. And the concept of sanctuary has always extended to those who were different. Sanctuaries do not line up with tribes. Think of the movie we showed last fall, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Esmeralda, a dancer who has been raised by gypsies, so doubly "other", was on her way to the gallows, charged with murdering her noble lover, when Quasimodo swings down from Notre Dame cathedral on a rope, scoops her out of the cart, and up into the church, crying "Sanctuary!" And Quasimodo himself found sanctuary in that church when as a child he was rejected because of his deformities. Today churches still extend sanctuary to those regarded as "other." In recent years, many churches, including UU ones, have offered sanctuary to people fearing deportation. Others have signed the Sanctuary Pledge, promising

not necessarily to house people but to stand with and support those who are facing deportation or discrimination. These stands show that they see these people whose circumstances, language, religion, and appearance may differ from theirs as fundamentally more like them than different and worthy of care. To go back to the theology of Martin Buber, as I often do, when we extend sanctuary to one another, we stand in relation to each other; we see the other as a “You” rather than an “It” to be used.

So what does sanctuary mean for us in this church?

It tells us that sanctuary is not about the building – what it looks like or what we have in it. Pews and pulpit, paint color and flowers, organs and guitars, cantatas or rounds, do not determine a sanctuary. And the whole building is our sanctuary, not just this room. To be a sanctuary, to be a church, means that we make this a place of refuge - a place of safety - a place of care. In this church we treat one another as valuable human beings, as kin. We welcome people – children and seniors; gay, straight, or bi; people who identify as female, people who identify as male, and people who find themselves along the gender spectrum. We welcome people who have lots of schooling and those who have less. We welcome people of differing incomes. We welcome people who come with a partner and those who come alone. And we don’t just welcome. We regard them with respect. We include them. We listen to one another. We support one another. And though we may not always agree – should not and cannot always agree in such a heterogeneous community, we always, always treat each other with care and love. And when we realize we haven’t treated someone with that care, we apologize. When we observe someone else treating someone as an It rather than a You, we speak up and say, “We love you but this isn’t how we treat one another here.” For this is sanctuary. This is what it means to be church.

One of the great things about this church, our First Parish, is the way we treat children. Parents often comment to me on how they appreciate not just the dedication of our teachers, but the way people here, whatever their age, take an interest in the children and youth, talk with them, and engage with them. And that isn’t always true in churches. Chuck and I left a church years ago when our boys were toddlers after it became clear that having absolute silence in worship was more important to that congregation than our family. And our boys weren’t unduly noisy. But here we hold as models adults like Jack Shaw and Donna Cogliano, both no longer with us, who spoke with our children as equals, who remembered not just their names, but their interests, and invited them into the life of the church alongside them.

And when we love and care for one another in this way, all of us, adults as well as children and youth, grow more into the gifts and graces we possess. We become more whole – or holy. And that wholeness or holiness spills out from us so that we carry sanctuary out of this place, in our very beings, into the world. This is what I observed just this past week: you embodied sanctuary at the STRIDE meeting, working with others to make this town safe and caring for all people; you embodied sanctuary at the Food Pantry, serving and receiving with dignity and respect; you embodied sanctuary for one another and yourselves at Monday Night Meditation and Gratitude groups; you embodied sanctuary at the Scituate Council of Churches’ meeting, working with others on projects to extend care and compassion throughout the town; you embodied sanctuary at the reading of *I Am Jazz* at the library, making clear our town’s inclusion of transgender youth and others who feel different from society’s norms; you met with Mary Margaret Earl last Sunday to learn how we can help embody sanctuary through the work of the UU Urban Ministry; today we embody sanctuary to those wanting to learn about end of life options. We are a sanctuary, but more important, we are sanctuary to one another and more and more to the world.

Someone told the story recently of a resident of Scituate who was gay and out but not sure how welcome he was in this town. This was at the time First Parish went through the formal process to become a Welcoming Congregation, and at the end of the process, celebrated by wrapping the whole building in a rainbow banner. You can see pictures on our website. The man was driving by, saw the church wrapped in the rainbow banner, and had to pull over because he was crying. He at last felt welcome. He felt he belonged. Our building embodied sanctuary for him, but only because those within the building had worked hard to create that space of holy refuge.

More and more we see examples of people being denied such refuge; we see people being treated as undeserving of care and kindness. We must counter by continuing to strive to see everyone as a “You” not an “It.” We must maintain and extend this place of sanctuary, for the world needs us to be sanctuary and we need us to be sanctuary.

- Pamela M. Barz