

A Dedication To Sanctuary

Psalm 78.5-7a

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Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



*“ God established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which God commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God ...”*

Four words: *More love. Less hate.* [from the anthem]

Every so often someone will say to me: “You progressive folk love to talk about love.” As if, I guess, they think love is easy – something that doesn’t cost very much and maybe isn’t worth anything; something naïve or childish or unrealistic; something easy to use as an excuse for the status quo.

Is love easy? Ever have to practice some of that “tough love” we talk about sometimes?

In my experience, hate is easy. Love is hard.

So I am impressed that the plaque outside on Harvard Avenue, declaring this building a historic landmark, says:

This distinctive English Gothic style church was completed in 1912, the third edifice of the pioneer Baptist congregation founded in 1869. Its spire, which once dominated the city skyline, continues to say: here is a church dedicated to the worship of God and human unity.

This is fascinating to me. This place is dedicated to “the worship of God” and “human unity.”

Isn’t the worship of God one of the most dis-unifying things in our human history? Isn’t the worship of God one of the excuses people use for hating one another – and worse?

What does it mean for this place to be dedicated to the worship of God and, in effect, more love, less hate?

To be sure, we have spent a lot of our time dedicating sanctuaries.

On August 26, 1872, our first building was dedicated on a lot donated by Elizabeth Holgate at what is now Fourth and Cherry.

Having outgrown that building, the church moved the old building to the back of the same lot and built a new one in front of it. That sanctuary was dedicated on June 4, 1899

After the re-grade made that building unusable and after a lot of wrangling about a new location, this building was built and dedicated on this day – September 22, 1912 – 107 years ago.

But there's more.

After a renovation of this sanctuary, it was re-dedicated in 1990.

And, in its centennial year – 2012 – it was re-dedicated again.

So we have done a lot of sanctuary dedications in our life together.

And it so happens that in 1980, when this building was declared a historic landmark, that same year Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act which later became the law under which certain "aliens," and those helping them, became "illegal."

So, for our ancestors, "more love, less hate" became not about the dedication *of* sanctuary but our dedication *to* sanctuary.

And that is where the great Washington Supreme Court Justice, Charles Z. Smith, shows up.

Now think about this for a minute. Here is a Washington State Supreme Court Justice, a former special assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the U.S. Department of Justice, and an Assistant Dean of the University of Washington Law School, speaking on behalf of the "illegal" act of offering sanctuary to Central American refugees.

In a sermon Charles Z. Smith preached at University Baptist Church in 1992, commemorating the 10th anniversary of our sister church declaring itself one of the first sanctuary churches in the country, Justice Smith said people of faith have a historic question to face:

Would they use the Bible to justify slavery ... or be part of the illegal "underground railroad" taking African American slaves to freedom in Canada?

Would Christians in Europe be silent about the Holocaust ... or would they be part of an illegal resistance movement to help Jews escape? And here I remind you of that great book by Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, about a little French Protestant church in south central France saving the lives of thousands of Jewish children and adults.

In the 1980s, Justice Smith asked, would people of faith be complicit in the nation's foreign policy that creates refugees and then turns them away at the border ... or would they be willing to commit an illegal act of sanctuary?

See if this doesn't sound familiar. In that sermon in 1992, Justice Smith says:
The reality is that our "foreign policy" in Central America is no policy at all. It is the wild harvest of racist, oppressive, and economic opportunist colonialism as practiced by our great

democracy. The truth is that historically Central America was considered to be the expendable, exploitable backyard of our country. In general, politicians of both parties over the years and successive administrations exploited resources, manipulated political factions, and ignored gross violations of human rights in such countries as El Salvador and Guatemala.

Here we are again.

While Justice Smith was a member of this congregation, he became a spokesperson for University Baptist and their commitment to sanctuary. And he did three things.

As a member of our denomination's General Board, he supported funding to turn classrooms at University Baptist into housing for refugees.

Then he supported a denomination-wide resolution that affirmed Article VI of the United States Constitution and the United Nations Protocol that:

... no government shall expel or return a refugee to a country where that person's life or freedom will be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion ... and that the Attorney General shall take due and deliberate actions necessary to safeguard the constitutional rights, personal safety and human dignity of United States citizens and aliens.

Finally he stood up against the Ninth District Court of Appeals in its decision that "the government may with impunity send informants into church services with secret tape recording equipment."

Justice Smith was clear. There is a dedication *of* sanctuary. And there is a dedication *to* sanctuary.

It is interesting to me that Justice Smith chose Psalm 78 as his text for a sermon on sanctuary. It's a psalm primarily about teaching our children so that they will teach the next generation the ways of God that "they should set their hope in God."

Perhaps he does so because he knows what is at stake.

In the sermon he tells the story of a woman in a Salvadoran village who hid in some trees while she witnessed elite government troops killing her blind husband and her four children, ages 9, 5, 3, and 8 months.

The Salvadoran military denied the whole thing as a fabrication by "subversives." Even after courageous reporters provided evidence that the woman's story was true, the U.S. State Department said that the journalists had been "taken in by rebel propaganda." It was, in other words, "fake news."

Justice Smith knew someone had to tell the story of that wife and mother. Someone had to tell the story of her children.

I love that old Sondheim piece:

*Children will not obey, children will listen ...
Careful the things you do, children will see ... and do...
[and] learn what to be
Careful before you say 'Listen to me'
Children will listen*

That's what's at stake. Children will listen and see and do ... and be.

They will know if they are simply props in the dedication of a sanctuary or if they are being told the truth and being trained to tell their own; if they are learning more love and less hate; if they are being empowered to dedicate themselves to sanctuary.

At the end of his sermon, Justice Smith says:

We cannot assume ... that we no longer have a problem in El Salvador and that there is no longer a need for compassionate vigilance ... We must remain ever vigilant to protect against our government's disregard of the human rights of oppressed persons in Central America or other areas of the world ... In time truth is born. And we shall realize the results of our work in the fullness of time.

That is the hope, I think. It's no less than the words honoring the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero: "we plant the seeds that someday will grow." We may not see it. Like Dr. King's last sermon, we may have been to the mountaintop but we all may not get to the other side.

But in time, truth is born, and we shall see the results of our work in the fullness of time.

Children will listen. Children will grow. Children will see and do.

A sea of children will lead us to the steps of City Hall and demand action on Climate Change.

Children will know if we are only interested in the dedication of this sanctuary or if we are dedicated to the sanctuary of the world.

Our spire may no longer dominate the skyline, but children may come to trust that this is a place where the worship of God leads to human unity - to more love and less hate. Or they will not. And if we betray their trust, do not be surprised if they refuse to ever enter the doors of this sanctuary again.

In one of those re-dedications of this sanctuary, Dr. Rod Romney wrote:

*From this spire ... o'er this city, beacon rays of hope be hurled,
Be a refuge ever ready to embrace a broken world.
Here to challenge all oppression, all injustice, wrong, and greed,
Here to offer all compassion, see our wounded spirits free.*

We may not see it all yet. We may never see it. But "in time, truth is born" – seeds will grow, we will go to up to that mountaintop and we will look over and we will see the promised land – "and we shall realize the results of our work in the fullness of time."

Beloved ones, once again we face the question our ancestors faced throughout our 150 years of history: Are we committed to the dedication and re-dedication of sanctuary or are we dedicated to sanctuary?

People need sanctuary. People need a refuge from violence. People need a place that is about more love and less hate. People need a community that keeps hope alive – not because it can always see immediate results but because it knows that in the fullness of time truth is born. People need a center where they can be still and know that God is still God – that there is a power already at work within them that is able to accomplish far more than anyone can ask or imagine.

This morning I cling to that sanctuary promise of Jesus in Matthew: “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.”

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The anthem, “More Love,” is by Mark Miller. The dedication dates are included in the upcoming updated history to be published soon. The sermon, “In Celebration Of Sanctuary, by Charles Z. Smith was presented at University Baptist Church on December 6, 1992. A copy was provided by Eleanor Smith from Justice Smith’s archives. Philip Hallie’s book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, was published in 1994 by HarperPerennial. The prayer honoring Oscar Romero is by Fr. Ken Untener of Saginaw, MI, in 1979. Dr. King’s sermon, “I See the Promised Land,” April 3, 1968. Rod Romney’s “God Of Every Spire and Steeple,” is used by permission of the AmaDeus Group.