Holy Places

by Robert Merrihew Adams

Robert Merrihew Adams, Professor of Philosophy at Yale University and Chair of the Princeton Theological Seminary Board of Trustees, preached this sermon in Miller Chapel at the Service of Rededication of the Chapel on October 9, 2000.

Texts: 1 Kings 8:1–30; 1 Peter 2:4–10

I remember a number of journeys my family made, when I was a child, between Albany, NY and Philadelphia. That was before the New Jersey Turnpike or the Interstate Highway System existed. We traveled on U.S. Route 1 through central New Jersey. It seemed we always stopped in Princeton, sometimes for a book to be consulted in the old Lenox Library. The rest of the family jokingly called Princeton "the Holy City" because my father, Arthur M. Adams, a Princeton Seminary alumnus in the class of 1934, found it so hard to pass near Princeton without stopping. "The Holy City": That is not exactly a Presbyterian way of talking. We knew that, and it was part of the fun of it.

The Bible, in both testaments, is pervaded with ambivalence about the idea of a temple or holy place. The archetype of this biblical ambivalence, perhaps, is Jacob, who erected a commemorative pillar and called the place Bethel, "house of God," because he received there the revelation that God is everywhere. Or at any rate that is what the revelation meant in the presbyterianized interpretation I learned as a child.

The book of Exodus contains four chapters of detailed plans for the construction of a sanctuary. But what they describe, and prescribe, is not a holy *place*. It is the tabernacle, a glorified tent, a portable, movable sanctuary, to be erected now in one place, now in another, as the holy people follow God's guidance. When King David proposes to build a temple to house the ark of God, God responds:

> Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all the places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel . . . , saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Sam 7:5–7)

On the other hand, God does add in the end, without explanation, that David's son, who will reign after him, "shall build a house for my name" (2 Sam 7:13).

And build it he did. When Solomon comes to dedicate the new temple, in a sumptuous prayer, he seems to have no doubt of the religious, and even salvific, importance of the holy "place." Yet the first word he dares to say about the temple in that prayer is this: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs 8:27).

We may read the New Testament as less committed than the Old to the holy *place*. The great speech of Stephen in Acts, which leads to his martyrdom, seems sharply critical of the concept of the temple and of its forms of worship. The idea of a temple is spiritualized in this evening's New Testament lesson, where Christians themselves are invited to be "like living stones . . . built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5), as it is when Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple?" (1 Cor 3:16). Jesus declares that "the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth," rather than in Jerusalem or in the holy place of the Samaritans (John 4:23). He predicts that not one stone of the temple in Jerusalem will be left upon another (Mark 13:2).

And yet Jesus would not have been crucified when he was if he had been willing at a certain time to leave Jerusalem. We can hardly understand the story of Jesus without recognizing how important it was to him and to his sense of his vocation to be and to worship in the holy city of his people. Paul too went, as is generally believed, to his martyrdom because he felt that he needed to be in the temple in Zion for a feast.

The tendency to spiritualize the idea of a holy place has been strong in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. We believe that the *people* of God are the true temple of God, and they can worship God in any place. True, very true. Yet we too have our holy places. Miller Chapel is not just any old building, and most of us can think of places of worship that have a special meaning for us.

How should it be otherwise? For while all places may be the same to God, they cannot be so to us creatures of the earth, to us rational mammals. As the phenomenon of homesickness reminds us, it seems to be natural to human beings to spend most of their lives in a relatively few familiar places. Our own homes and our own offices, if we are fortunate enough to have them, are very important to us, and we care in a special way about what happens in them. Similarly we are likely to have special feelings about our own houses of worship.

Not all special places have the same meaning for us. We invest different places with different meanings as part of the ordering of our lives. Many of us

would not sleep easily in a room that is not a bedroom, and most churches would resist putting up a ping-pong table in front of the pulpit.

Holiness is not just any special meaning a place may have. If places can be holy at all, they are as physical links that connect us with spiritual meaning—commonly by connecting us with other people with whom we share that meaning. I am enough of an early modern Protestant to think that the physical may not have more than subordinate importance, either spiritually or metaphysically. It remains, however, that our contact with each other—and with Jesus—is mediated by things we can see and touch: the mouths of parents and teachers from whom we learned about God; Bibles in which the story of Jesus has been preserved; the water, wine, and bread of the sacraments; and also, less fundamental and less indispensable no doubt, but still important to most of us, the architectural structures that help us, again and again, to mark off and recognize and experience as coherent, amid the often unmanageable flux of life, an event that is our common worship of God. And when a structure has been used in that way for many years, it may also become a physical link with the spiritual lives of people who have gone before us in the faith. This chapel is such a place. It is a place where we have prayed with others. For some of us its walls ring with voices now silent that have inspired us—voices of teachers and friends who live in Christ but tread the earth no longer. For the Seminary community it is a physical link with the faith of generations of its members reaching back through almost the whole history of the Seminary. Time would fail me—as the writer of Hebrews (11:32) says—time would fail me tell of all who prayed in this room—of Charles Hodge and Josef Hromadka, of John Mackay and James McCord, of teachers of Christ with perspectives as different as J. Gresham Machen and Paul Lehmann, of those like Francis James Grimké, Muriel Van Orden Jennings, and Eugene Carson Blake who opened new doors for the church, and of those like Ashbel Green Simonton and James Reeb, who gave their lives to spread the gospel of Christ and to declare God's will for justice.

The special meaning of this place is in its being set apart for our common worship of God. According to 1 Pet 2:9, we are called to be "a royal priesthood." What for? "To declare the excellences [the *aretai*] of the one who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light." In other words, to praise God. To thank God—yes—for our salvation, but more than that, to praise the divine being that is wonderful in itself before it is wonderful for us—the divine light that is marvelous for us because first it is marvelous in itself. First Peter assigns God's people the role of declaring God's *aretai*. The King James Version and the Revised Standard Version translate *aretai* as

"praises" and "wonderful deeds," respectively; but the word is the usual Greek word for "virtues," and I believe that even though we are praising one who has saved us, the text in speaking of God's *aretai* rightly orients our praise toward the intrinsic virtues or excellences of the divine nature that ground praises and wonderful deeds but that far transcend God's relations to *us*. I believe P. T. Forsyth was right in saying that God "is so much to us because He is more to Himself," that hallowing God's name "was the first function of [Christ's] Cross," and that "we have no final [well-being] but our share in that worship and glory of the Father by the Son."[1]

As a royal priesthood, the people of God does not absolutely require, but naturally wants, houses of worship. At a Christian theological school no place on the campus is more important than the space that is designed to help structure our common worship. For this is where we gather, and need to know that we are gathered, to do that which is most truly and centrally ours to do: to praise God.

In the church we sometimes hear objections to the spending of money and effort to adorn our worship—claims that the resources should go elsewhere. Those protests may not always be pointless; the Bible is very clear that worship that turns its back on the needs of the world and avoids efforts to do good concretely is not authentic worship of God. And yet we far too easily forget the magnitude of the good that is offered to the world in worship, perhaps in part because we so easily overestimate the magnitude of the good we will be able to accomplish in the world. Those of us who have been pastors have probably learned, in trying to do it, that it is much harder truly to help a person, and that we have fewer real opportunities to do it, than we may have imagined when we first set out to be helpers. The good we can do is always fragmentary—a bit here and a bit there. It is insecure and very likely to be impermanent. It is apt to be morally ambiguous, for we are sinners and live among sinners. In fighting for the right we are very likely to do some wrong as well. The great, pure, and permanent good for which we long is at home only in God. There is a love for the Good, and a desire to be purely and wholly for the Good, that finds in our share in the worship and glory of the Father by the Son a fulfillment it can find nowhere else. The possibility of that relation to the divine perfection is a gift of inestimable value to humanity in its finitude and sin.

We rightly rejoice in the beauty of this place and of the worship that fills it tonight. We hope and pray that in the years that Miller Chapel will see, God

[1] Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy* (London: Duckworth, 1916), 3–4.

will give a new vision and a new birth of spiritual power and vitality to the Presbyterian and Reformed churches. But we do not know that that will happen. That is in God's hands, not in ours. Even insofar as it rests in human hands, it is in countless hands besides ours. It depends on how millions of other people respond to God's leading. We do not and should not control that. What does rest simply in our hands, and on our tongues, is our praise of God. That ability is gift enough to claim our everlasting thanks.

And so to God alone "be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:21).