

A TEAR IN THE CURTAIN

(05/06/12)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 26:31-35
Hebrews 9:1-14; 6:19-20
Mark 15:33-39

"We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered." (Hebrews 6:19-20)

Last week, in my reflections on baptism, I noted that the architectural layout of a church sanctuary is symbolic of the spiritual journey. In the Roman tradition the journey begins with baptism in a chapel at the back of the sanctuary, where one enters the church. The center aisle symbolizes the journey toward God, toward salvation, toward healing and wholeness. The pilgrim embarking upon this journey is guided by scripture, which is read from the lectern, and by the sermon, which is delivered from the pulpit. In the Reformed tradition, the religious tradition within which this church stands, we have what is called a divided chancel, with the lectern on one side and the pulpit on the other. This helps us distinguish the Word of God from the preacher's subjective attempt to articulate it and demonstrate its relevance for our lives.

Guided by scripture and sermon, we come to the communion table. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not simply a remembrance of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples; it is a sacrament of presence. If we partake *in faith*, we enter into the presence of our Lord. We gather around this table with him and with one another.

After the communion table we come to the altar. The altar is the place of sacrifice. It symbolizes our need to sacrifice everything that keeps us from entering into communion with God. A Buddhist would tell us that what we need to sacrifice is our grasping, our attachments, and our egocentricity. Through this we voluntarily enter into the process of death and rebirth that is symbolized in the cross. In the Reformed tradition, we have an empty cross on our altar. This reminds us that the incarnation of the Logos, the Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth did not end with his death. It did not even end with his resurrection. It is a reminder that he lives on as the Holy Spirit both within and among us.

As I neared the end of my sermon and glanced over at the altar, I realized I had left something out. I did mention the candles on the altar, which symbolize the inner light that guides us on our spiritual journey. I didn't mention the flowers. I actually think the flowers are

there just because they are pretty. However, I read some time ago that flower seeds were discovered in a grave near Lascaux, France that could be dated to about twenty thousand years ago. So even at this early stage in the evolution of *homo sapiens* there was a sense of both death and something that survives after death, just as the seeds of the flower, when they fall into the ground, burst forth into new life the following spring.

But that's not the point that I wanted to make. What I totally forgot to mention was the curtain that is at the back of the altar. So today I would like to say a few words about the altar curtain and its relevance for our spiritual journey.

As recorded in our scripture lesson this morning from the book of Exodus, God is speaking to the people of Israel through Moses. The Israelites, in the course of their forty-year exodus, reach the base of Mount Sinai. God calls Moses up onto the mountain, where he appears to Moses as a "dense cloud." God instructs Moses to consecrate the people of Israel. He tells them that the Israelites are not to touch the holy mountain or they will die. On the third day God descends upon Mount Sinai in the form of fire; the whole mountain is covered in smoke. God summons Moses to the top of the mountain, where Moses speaks with God and God answers him in thunder.

God gives Moses a number of stipulations regarding the Israelites' worship. He tells Moses that the altar for the burnt offerings shall not be made of hewn stone. He tells Moses how to baptize the people in "the blood of the covenant." In chapter 25, God gives Moses highly detailed instructions concerning how the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, the table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstand, the tent over the tabernacle, the altar of burnt offering, and the curtain should be constructed.

Each of these elements has a history. It would be interesting to explore each of them to understand not only ancient Hebrew worship but also how these elements and symbols carried over into Christian sanctuaries and worship. Today we are focusing on the curtain.

The curtain is also referred to in the Bible as a veil. In the King James Version of this morning's gospel lesson, we read:

*And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom."
(Mark 15:38)*

A veil is a cloth covering that a woman wore to conceal her face or cover her head. An Israelite woman wore a veil at the time of her wedding. When Rebekah first saw Isaac, she put on her veil. Later they were married. Jacob's inability to recognize that Leah had been substituted for Rachel on his wedding night can be explained if Leah were veiled. According to the apostle Paul, women should wear veils when praying or prophesying (1 Cor. 11:4-16).

I think the custom of women wearing veils is interesting. I suspect that it has to do with man's innate fear of women and the feminine, their fear of the sacred mysteries of menstruation, the cycles of the moon, and the mysteries of birth. It has been carried to extremes in the Islamic burka, where it seems to be used as a means of subjugation. However, it was originally used to identify and set off a holy place. I think that has some interesting implications.

Moses used a veil to cover his face after he received the second set of tablets of the testimony at Mount Sinai. You will recall that he smashed the first set in a fit of rage when he discovered that the Israelites fashioned and worshipped a golden calf during his first trip up Mount Sinai. When he received the second set of tablets, which were stored in the Ark of the Covenant, Moses' face shone from the glory of the presence of God. This made the people afraid. Consequently, Moses wore the veil except when he went in to speak with God.

The veil, setting off a holy place, evolved into a curtain. It became the covering over the entrance to the "most holy place" or the "Holy of Holies." It hung before the Ark, the box or chest concerning the tablets of the law, when the Israelites were traveling in the wilderness. It later became an important part of the sanctuary of Solomon's temple. In the wilderness, only Aaron and his sons were permitted to pass beyond the veil (Num. 18:7). At a later time, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and, then, only on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 6:2).

According to the gospels, the veil or curtain of the Temple mysteriously tore in two at the moment of Jesus' death. This exposed the Holy of Holies to the people.

The accounts in the gospels differ. In Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, darkness covered the land and the curtain was torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death. Matthew, which was written after Mark, tells us that when Jesus died, darkness covered the land, the curtain was torn in two, an earthquake occurred, the tombs were opened, and the bodies of some of the saints were raised from the dead. Luke indicates that the curtain was torn in two just

before Jesus died. Luke mentions the darkness but not the earthquake. The last gospel to be written, the Gospel of John, contains no mention of darkness, earthquake, or curtain.

So what is the symbolism of the curtain behind our altar? The curtain is what separates the people from the Holy of Holies. We could think of it as what separates us from God. Then what would it mean that the curtain is torn in two from top to bottom, that “the veil of the Temple is rent?” The testimony that the curtain or veil has been rent, has been torn in two, means the barrier which has separated us from God no longer exists. What or who tore this barrier in two? What or who enabled all of us, not just the priests, to come into the presence of God? The answer, my friends, is Jesus.

There are two theological traditions or ways of thinking about this. The first focuses on the altar as the central element of both worship and belief. The ancient Israelites sacrificed animals to God. The altar was where the animals were killed, dismembered, and burned. From this perspective, the sacrifice of Jesus is central to our worship and belief. In this tradition, the priest stands in the front of the chancel facing the altar with his back to the people. The emphasis is on sin and atonement, our sin and Jesus’ death, his crucifixion as the atonement. This is why churches from this tradition tend to have a crucifix, the cross with the *corpus* (Jesus’ body) hanging behind the altar on the wall or on the curtain. In this tradition, the crucifixion is central. Jesus’ death atones for our sins; we are washed clean in the “blood of the Lamb.”

This is not the only way of understanding the message or gospel of Jesus. In other traditions, in place of the altar, the central focus of the chancel area of the sanctuary is the communion table. Since Vatican II, in almost all Roman Catholic churches the altar has been deemphasized and moved away from the wall and the communion table has been made central. The priest no longer faces away from the people when celebrating the Eucharist, but faces toward them, the way we Protestants do when we celebrate The Sacrament of Holy Communion. When the central focus becomes the communion table, and when the minister sits or stands behind the table facing the congregation, it demonstrates that we are all sitting around the table.

When the altar is central, God is separate from us. God is hidden from us. God is behind the curtain. When the communion table is central, God is not separate from us. God is in our midst. We are sitting at table with our Lord. What is central is not the crucifixion, but the

resurrection. This is what is symbolized in the empty or resurrection cross. We are saved not by Jesus' sacrifice but by his teaching, his resurrection, and his presence both within and among us.

We carry both sets of symbolism in our sanctuary and in our worship. We talk of God in both ways. We know our sin has separated or alienated us from our deepest selves, from our brothers and sisters, and from God; we also know that we can never be separated from God by our sin. We know we have to embark upon a journey, a pilgrimage to find both God and ourselves; we also know that we don't have to take a single step to find either God or ourselves. The Holy Spirit is already within us. We know that the kingdom of God has a social dimension. We work to create the kingdom of God on earth: to eliminate war, racism, sexism, exploitation, and poverty. This is the mission of the church. We also know that, as Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is already spread upon the earth, but people do not know it." The kingdom of God is a living reality within us. All we have to do is enter into it to become resurrected people.

Some Christians find themselves within the first tradition; they take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus gave his life to save us from our sin. Some Christians find themselves more within the second tradition. They focus more on the resurrection than the crucifixion. They find comfort in the belief that Jesus is always present to us as the Holy Spirit. Whichever stream of theology is most meaningful to you, we all believe that the curtain of the Temple was torn in two by Jesus.

Approximately ten years ago, thanks to donations from our Memorial Funds, we replaced our old, faded, and somewhat tattered altar curtain with the beautiful one we have today. At the time, if I recall, I suggested to the Diaconate that, for the sake of theological correctness, we should probably tear the new curtain in two. They replied that this would be an example of carrying theological correctness too far. Basically they said no. I have to agree. We don't have to actually tear the curtain to remember the powerful symbolism that is contained in it. If there is no distance between God and us, no separation between God and us, it is because of Jesus. As the unknown writer of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote:

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

(Hebrews 6:19-20)

Thanks to the generous contributions of our members throughout the years, we have a beautiful sanctuary, a sanctuary that is rich not only in history but also in symbolism, a sanctuary

that is a beautiful and meaningful place for us to come together as the gathered church to worship God and experience the presence of Christ both within and among us. It is also a reminder to us of our own spiritual journey and the resources that God places within our hands and within our hearts for the sometimes onerous journey that so many of us take through life.

Now let us gather around this communion table, remembering that the curtain, the veil that separates us from God has been torn in two, remembering that the curtain, the veil that separates us from our Lord has been torn in two, and that the one who tore this curtain in two has invited us to enter into his presence and to share his presence with each other and with a world that is in need of his healing touch.

Let us so partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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