

A Sanctuary for All: Ephesians 1

Norwalk Christian Church, April 21, 2018, "Making Room for All" - Capital Campaign, Kickoff Sunday

Well, the time has come! We have officially kicked off our Capital Campaign. Over today and the next four Sundays, we will live together into this campaign. You will have time to ask questions. To talk one-on-one, if you would like, to some of our campaign team. Through sermons and skits; songs and stories we will enter into this campaign and imagine what could be possible. We will be challenged to make a pledge over the next 3 years to achieve this goal--and I believe we can meet and exceed our goal.

"Making Room for All"--that's our theme and that's what we're doing. We say all the time, "All are Welcome". But we want to make sure that it's true. That this space is accessible; that the ministry we are called to do, we are actually able to accomodate.

We're doing this for mission; to make possible the things that are already happening among us, and to open the doors for more to happen.

Our guide along the way will be the book of Ephesians. And each week in worship, we will make a stop on a part of our renovation plan. This Sunday, our focus is on Sanctuary. And let's begin with a quiz:

If you were married in this room, raise your hand.

If one of your children were married in this room, raise your hand.

If you've officiated a wedding in this room, raise your hand. -- Sorry, I didn't want to be left out.

If you were dedicated as a baby in this room, raise your hand.

If you've dedicated your child in this room, raise your hand.

If you've seen your grandchild dedicated in this room, raise your hand.

If you were baptized in this room, raise your hand.

If you've seen your child baptized in this room, raise your hand.

If you've attended a funeral of a loved one in this room, raise your hand.

A lot of life is shared in this space. We call this room a Sanctuary. "Sanctuary" has two primary definitions. One is "a consecrated place...a sacred place." This space is holy. This is where the church at Norwalk Christian Church has gathered to worship since this room was dedicated in 1972. If these walls could talk.

A lot of us were told, as kids, not to run in this room. And don't eat in it. Or drink in it. After all, it's a holy place. That's what I was told in my church as a kid. We weren't even allowed to chew gum in the sanctuary.

But there was this old man named Henry Porter. He was one of the founders of our church. And even though we couldn't chew gum in the sanctuary, we would go over to

the pew were Henry Porter sat, and he would sneak us a stick of gum. (He would also burp out loud in the middle of the sermon.)

Gum wasn't allowed in the Sanctuary! It was holy! But you know what? His gum-sneaking enterprise is what made that room into a sanctuary for me.

Because this place is not holy because of the furnishings, or the wood paneling or pews, or songbooks, or lack of screens on the wall--architecture has nothing to do with it.

The holiness of this space has nothing to do with what (or who) is kept out, but it has everything to do with who is let in. This space is holy, not because of the things inside or the way it looks, but because it is a space where you are loved, and all are welcomed--just as they are.

Which brings us to our second definition of "Sanctuary". A sanctuary is a place of refuge and protection. The two definitions are really one definition. This place is holy because it is a place of refuge and protection.

Let's be honest. When we were yelled at as kids for running in the church...it sure didn't make this place feel like a safe place of refuge and protection. But when we were prayed for, when the church laid hands on us, when an old man snuck me banned-gum in between the pews, when we shared life together, joys and tears--when we met God in worship, in the waters of baptism, at the table--this place became holy. This place became refuge.

Earlier, we read the entire first chapter of Ephesians. It's one of my favorite chapters in all of the Bible. The Apostle Paul is writing a letter to these Christians in the city of Ephesus, the Ephesians. They are people he loved dearly. He started this church. Baptized them. Married them. And in Acts 20, we read the story of him leaving this church, and they embrace each other. They cry for one another.

Paul loved this church, and you can sense it when you read this letter. He knows them. He celebrates them. He does not cease to give thanks to God for them. And chapter 1 ends with a beautiful prayer for them. He prays that God will give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation..that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened, and they will know the hope to which God has called them. That they will know the immeasurable greatness of God's power that is at work within them.

This power--it's the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. That's the kind of power at work within that church--and with us, Church!

And Paul ends the prayer with this magnificent image: He says, "God has put all things under Christ feet and has made Jesus the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

In other words: we--the church--are Christ's body, and we are filled with the one who fills all in all. We are bursting at the seams with Christ. Stuffed full with God's power, which fills all and is in all.

That's why this place is holy. God is here because we are here--and we are holy because God fills us all up.

But there's one more step. Sanctuary welcomes us in. We share life here. God fills us up. We are bursting at the seams with God's power. And now, we must go out from this place into the world.

This is God's plan, for God to fill us up so that we can fill the world up. I want you to imagine this magnificent four-tiered fountain. God's glory is at the top, and it flows out, spilling over into the second tier, Jesus, and Jesus' glory fills it up, spilling over into the church, and the church's glory fills it up, and it spills over and drenches the whole world.

This is what we are called to be.

And I've seen it happen. I've seen lives changed in this place. I've seen these pews filled with the Christmas presents you bought for families in our communities. I've seen you care for one other. Check-in on one another. Hug one another and pray for one another and cry tears of grief and of joy for one another. I've seen you welcome in people you don't know, and make them feel like they are part of a family. Here, in this place, you've been the church.

We sang earlier and will sing it again in a moment: "Lord, Prepare me to be a sanctuary." You, church--you are the sanctuary. You are the holy place of refuge.

In this place, God fills us up, so that we may be a living sanctuary for our world.

Because our world is hungry for sanctuary, where all are welcomed and all are loved. Where Christ fills all and is in all. And if there is anything ever in the way of someone encountering God here, if there is ever any barrier to someone experiencing God's welcome in this place, may we remove it, so that all will truly be welcome.

If you've ever felt the welcoming presence of God in this space, raise your hand.

It's not the walls, it's not the architecture, it's not the stained glass--it's you--God's presence in you--that's what makes this place holy place of refuge. May we leave the holiness of this space, and go out into this world with this message: that Norwalk Christian Church is making room, so that all can be experience God's welcoming presence in this space.

Amen? Amen.