

THE WONDER OF SACRED SPACE

CHERYL B. JOHNS

[Sacred spaces set aside for youth camps and camp meetings have been a significant part of our past. Do they have a place in our future?]

Perhaps there are places that have a mysterious hold on your life. They may include a church building where you first experienced the hand of God. Or, such a place may be camp meeting grounds where you were marked by spiritual experiences and further marked by the people who returned there each year.

In my own Christian journey there have been such places. For me they were “Bethels,” or “houses of God,” where the line between this world and the supernatural seemed to be especially thin. Connecting to these places in some way connected me not only to God but to the people of God. This included those present with me in time, but also in a mysterious way to those who had prayed, fellowshiped, laughed, and cried together long before I was born. On this common ground there seemed to be a charged atmosphere, created by the Holy Spirit, where the communion of saints, transcending time and space, had a way of gathering with us.

For me, the camp meeting ground of the Upper South Carolina Conference of the Pentecostal Holiness Church was “enchanted space.” Each year it

would reach out and claim me on a deep level. Its open-air tabernacle, with sawdust aisles, rough wooden seats, and altars, was the same place where my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins had encountered God. It was also here that the hand of God would reach out, altering the course of my life’s journey. In this “tent of meeting” I promised God, “I will go where You want me to go and do what You want me to do.” Just a few months ago, on these same grounds, my nephew was ordained. I took comfort knowing that yet another generation had returned here to keep the faith.

Church homecomings, while not so dramatic and prolonged as camp meeting, marked me in specific and deep ways. In particular, it was the stories of my great-grandmother, the founder of our congregation, that had a most profound impact. It was she who, after being expelled from the Methodist church in 1907, organized a church where she and others of like Pentecostal faith were free to shout and dance in the Spirit. Her picture hung over the sanctuary doors in the vestibule of our church, and each Sunday we would all pass under that icon as we entered worship.

This ancestor imaged for me strength, but in some ways, I feared what she represented. Homecomings were times when I had to struggle with this fear as I was held in the wonder and in holy attraction of the testimonies of the saints long dead. During homecoming services, ordinary things and ordinary time became part of the extraordinary. On such occasions, time and space seemed fluid with the past breaking into the present and the future coming to get us all.

A Rich Tradition

In the latter part of the 20th century it became popular to sell off camp meeting grounds and do away with homecomings and grave decoration days. Such places and events seemed to be relics of the past, and the financial incentives from the sell of properties made it “profitable” to let go of sacred ground. Perhaps at that time we did not ponder what we were giving up. Could it be that, in severing our ties to common ground, we lost something of the sacred?

The traditions of camp meeting, homecoming, and grave decoration have a rich history that goes back to the mid-17th century following the formation of the Protestant Church in Scotland.

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During this time there was a forceful convergence of pre-Christian Celtic spirituality, with its emphasis on the natural world and the great force of Protestant preaching. These two streams merged in protest of the established church. The Scottish Reformers or Covenanters, having been ousted from their pulpits, began to preach in the open fields. Their meetings, known as “conventicles,” were strongly opposed by the king. In 1661 the covenant preachers were officially ousted from their churches, and field preaching became a capital offense. War broke out, resulting in thousands of people who died and many leaders who were deported to the Southern colonies in America. North Carolina, especially, became the “dumping ground” for these Scottish rebel preachers.

Yet, while these outdoor meetings were illegal, they were difficult to entirely stamp out. Throughout the latter part of the 17th century and early 18th century, they were extremely popular. During this period, in addition to preaching, the conventicles added the dimension of Eucharistic services. Having Communion outside added to the element of protest. It was a bold statement that the altar in the church and its ministers could not contain the sacrament. The earth was the Lord’s, and the Table was the Lord’s!

These outdoor events were often held in churchyards upon the graves of the ancestors. Here stone tables, sometimes measuring 20 yards in length, were set up in parallel rows. At one end of these tables a circular cairn of stones several feet high was placed for the minister to stand.

As more and more people left the Scottish highlands for America, they transplanted into the soil of the American South a love for these “outdoor-rebel” meetings. The Scottish practices took root in camp meeting grounds and influenced the development of grave decoration days and homecomings. During the Second Great Awakening (1790-1830), some of the more famous camp meeting grounds, such as the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting in Kentucky, were places of extraordinary preaching and protracted times of prayer. Manifestations of the Spirit were common as people were known to have laughed, danced, and cried in the Spirit.

Even today, if you drive through the rural South, especially the Piedmont and Appalachian regions, you will see the countryside dotted with remnants of this colorful and ancient past: long stone

tables set between the church and the graveyard, freshly decorated graves, and signs pointing to camp meeting grounds nestled within the mountains and the countryside.

A Rich Future?

Are such places relics of a past, or could it be that they address the needs of a new generation that seeks sacred space and common ground? We should ask these questions because we may have been letting go of places especially suited for ministry in the postmodern context. In a postmodern world characterized by nomadic wandering and restlessness of spirit, people are hungry for places that provide security and identity. Many long for a “home place” where they can return year after year and find family, fellowship, and belonging.

In addition, in a world where nothing is sacred, people are longing for “sacred space.” People today hunger for ancient places where saints before lived and prayed together. They hunger to find places that transcend the trendy, the momentary, and the transient. As one young adult told me, “I find comfort in the space that is older and larger than I.”

Another reason such places are attractive to post-moderns is the connection they have with nature. While it may have been out of necessity that the dissenting Scotts chose the outdoors for their meetings, they also had an awareness of nature as “primed” for God’s presence. It declared the glory of God. Thus, nature was already the perfect “tabernacle” or dwelling place for God’s glory. The dissenters instinctively knew that God could not be domesticated and trapped within the walls of the established church. Worshiping outside was thus a political as well as a theological statement on the sovereignty of God.

Modern Christianity has been guilty of domesticating God. Far too often we have attempted to confine God within the walls of our churches. We have a serious case of what Richard Louv calls “nature deficit disorder.” Nature deficit disorder keeps us from seeing God in His creation and recognizing our connection to the natural world. It creates a Christianity that has little capacity for wonder, and one that is way too anthropomorphic. Nature deficit disorder causes us to forget that God is at work restoring the whole creation. We don’t even

notice the groaning of creation or understand how our groans connect with that which is larger than ourselves.

The contemporary hunger for the natural world is deep. By providing places where people can both find God and discover God’s creation, we are able to bring healing to fractured and disconnected lives. Such places offer a therapeutic vision of salvation that connects the material world to the spiritual world. The Hebrew concept of “shalom” comes to bear here in its meaning of wholeness, peace, and harmony within the created order. Places of “shalom” offer healing for many a weary postmodern pilgrim.

For these reasons many of the old camp meeting and conference centers are continuing to thrive with the participation of young families. New generations of Methodists return each year to the sacred shores of Lake Junaluska Assembly Grounds. I have had conversations with young Presbyterians who find comfort in knowing that Montreat Family Campground offers them the same space it offered their elders. The old Indian Springs Holiness Camp Meeting Grounds in Georgia continues to attract hundreds of Wesleyan-Holiness adherents. Young people in the Church of God in Florida find security knowing that Wimauma Campground, where their grandmothers danced in the Spirit, stirring up the sawdust, is there for them to come home to.

Camp meeting in secular, closed space such as convention centers does not have the same attraction as meeting on common ground. It is true that wherever the people of God gather to worship in Spirit and in truth, God’s presence will be there. But, on a deeper level, secular space does not have the capacity to call us back to the stories of our people. Families can live in transient housing and still be family. But, there is something about a home place that gives that family security, continuity, and safety. So it is with the family of God. We need our home places.

We need our sacred places. We need places where, in the words of the poet T. S. Eliot, “prayer has been valid.” Sacred space, just like a sacred life, is rare and beautiful. It is a place that is sanctified, set aside for a larger purpose. We need to know that after we are gone, our children will continue to have a place that draws them into the sacred circle, naming it and calling it home.

So, what are we to do? Budgets are getting cut, and the upkeep of camp meeting grounds can be quite expensive. The little money we have should be used in good stewardship for both evangelism and discipleship. For that reason, we need to evaluate our



present properties in light of two questions: *First, in what ways do these properties provide formation of believers?* Looking at sacred grounds in light of formation causes us to evaluate how they offer Christian identity. Such places have the potential to form postmodern believers in the following ways:

- Helping them to understand the common stories of the Pentecostal faith
- Providing an identity that is rooted in the past
- Giving them space for encounters with God
- Offering places for retreat away from the overwhelming demands of modern life
- Giving opportunity to connect with God through the natural world

Many people see the budget dilemma as creating a choice between evangelism/mission and maintaining grounds that are rarely used. When poised in this manner, we would see mission as trumping camp meeting grounds. However, there is the second question we need to ask: *How can these places become a means of evangelism and mission?* Traditional mission and evangelism

is giving way to a whole new paradigm. Gone are the days when sinners would assemble in a stadium or church building to hear an evangelist. Gone are the days of door-to-door evangelism. Yet, in a very profane world people are hungry for the sacred. By offering sacred space, we feed that hunger. The younger generation in particular hungers for space where they can find security, grace, and community. A few years ago my son-in-law, Justin Allen, became campus minister for the Wesley Foundation at the University of Memphis. When he took the position he inherited a student center with a chapel. These facilities were run down, and there were only six or seven students attending the weekly dinner and worship service. The chapel itself looked like a time capsule from the 1970s. It was never used.

Justin gathered with the students and asked them, “What do you need this place to be?” Their response was that they needed a place to come to during the day where they could enter sacred, safe space, a place where they could quiet their soul, and a place where they could meet with God.

In response to their input, he launched a remodeling project on the chapel. The students helped design a place that contained separate compartments or “holy places.” There was the “desert space,” complete with sand and stones. There was the artistic space where students could draw and paint. One space was a garden with running water and plants. They created a confessional space—a cross upon which they could nail their sins. They also made a “Holy of Holies” space complete with an altar for prayer and Communion elements. Instead of being used on rare occasions, this chapel became a place that was open every day. Students could stop by between classes and spend an hour in the chapel. Word got out on campus about the “sacred space,” and many students, some who had never gone to a church before, began stopping by. Justin was available for prayer, talk, or a game of pool. More and more students were drawn to the Wesley Foundation on a daily basis, resulting in an attendance increase from 7 to 120 at the Tuesday evening worship service. There were conversions, and several of the students were drawn into full-time ministry. The chapel received attention from the local press and the university which, in 2006-2007, gave the Wesley Foundation

its annual Phoenix Award. The Phoenix Award recognizes campus groups that transform into thriving organizations.

In regard to mission and evangelism, many of our sacred grounds are, like the Wesley Center at the University of Memphis, waiting to be reborn out of the ashes. What if our sacred grounds were offered to the world as places for retreat, for reflection, and for community? What if we offered weekend opportunities for rest and celebration of the arts? What if we offered healing stations where people could come for prayer?

We cannot go back in time and re-create the old camp meeting days. But, as we go forward, we can take with us the primal elements of the camp meeting: sacred ground, Christian community, nature, Word and Spirit, family and friends. The world hungers for such. Perhaps the Phoenix is lying in wait in the ashes for the time when it can arise with healing in its wings.

Cheryl Bridges Johns serves as professor of Christian formation and discipleship at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee.