

The Steeple People

Feb 27, 2022

(Mk 14:3-11; Eph 2:13-20; Ps 19) Rev . J.Koyama

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which comes at the end of the season of Epiphany and before Ash Wednesday, which signals the beginning of Lent. The usual Gospel for today describes how Jesus, Peter, James and John go up onto a mountaintop to pray. And there the appearance of Jesus' face changes. His clothes take on a dazzling white. And Moses and Elijah, the greatest figures in Israel's past appear before them and engage in discussion with Jesus.

Then, inspired by their mountaintop experience, Jesus and his disciples return back down the mountain to begin the journey that leads to Jerusalem and the cross and to his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

That is where we are in the church year. So, you may be wondering why I chose a different Gospel reading for this morning. I chose it because I think we need some Biblical reflection in relation to a dilemma that we are in, and I think that the story about the woman who pours costly perfume on Jesus's feet can help us to think about it. The dilemma I am referring to has to do with the high cost of our physical plant, and of maintaining our steeple.

Imagine how many churches there must be across New England that are faced with steeple maintenance and the eye-opening costs associated with it. And I am sure that a similar question crosses your mind that crossed the minds of those who saw the woman pouring out costly perfume over Jesus's feet. "Is this not a waste of resources? Couldn't our money be put to better use, such as benefiting the poor?"

I think it is a good question, which is why, the people gathered around Jesus asked it. And I too am very interested in what Jesus's response might be, because I too, very much want the money I earn and give to the church, to truly serve God's purposes. I don't want them to just be tossed into a bottomless pit of maintenance costs.

Jesus answer to the crowd is helpful. "Why are you bothering her?" he says. "

She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ The poor you will always have with you,^[b] and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.

And then he says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

So I'm going to put in my own words part of what I think Jesus is saying to us. here. Firstly, I think he is telling us that we don't have to choose between spending on our love for God and our care for the poor. That we can do both. In other words, there is a time for "costly" devotion and a time for ministering to those in need.

I think you can also say that the act of pouring out perfume on Jesus's feet was not a wasted expense because the expense itself, highlighted how important it was to the woman that she identify Jesus as the source of her devotion.

The practical question then is, "Is putting money into a steeple fund justifiable in this way?" Is not our steeple also a costly, but public expression of where our devotion lies?

When we think about our physical plant, it is easy to overlook the fact that everything about our church is designed to point toward and celebrate the presence of God in our lives. The pulpit in the center reminds us that God is always speaking to our hearts and minds. The big doors beckon all to enter. The baptismal font and cross reminds us of the life we share in Christ. The chandeliers represent the fire of the Holy Spirit descending on the congregation, as does the stylized hole, a

kind of mini cupola cut into the ceiling. The curve of the sanctuary enhances the acoustics, so that the voices of God's children can rise in a clear response of praise.

When a church building is razed, or a steeple is loped off, it is not just a practical matter of saving money or the taking down of a generic container. It is the removal of a powerful and elaborate expression of costly devotion; a place where you can go for a mountaintop experience of being with God; where you can meet and praise the one who saved your life.

Here is what I see when I see a church steeple. I see it as a kind of pointing finger, that reminds me to look up at the sky; as a way of remembering that my life is not solely defined by this earthly plane.

We are Downlookers

I think that one of the reasons we forget about the sky is because we spend most of our time looking down. We spend most of our time looking for ways to fix broken systems, mend broken relationships, and trying to make ends meet. Here at ground level our lives are consumed by a never-ending battle to stay alive and to carve out a little happiness.

Devoting our attention to what is happening down here is a practical necessity. Think about it. When you drive here and there checking items off your “to do” list, you have to pay attention to traffic signs, sudden curves, pedestrians and whatever else may appear. You can’t spend your time admiring the sky.

As a result, I think we tend to forget that there is such a thing as looking up. We lose our awareness that half of what is actually present with us is the sky.

But then, when we do stop to look up at it, we are often surprised by how powerfully it speaks to our hearts. It speaks to us in a way that is different than we are accustomed to, when we are caught up in our worldly strivings.

When we are consumed with life in that narrow band between the surface of the earth and eye level, nothing else seems to exist apart from what we and our fellow humans are engaged in. But when we look up into the sky, our own problems suddenly seem small in the vastness that surrounds us from above.

Contrasting Sky and Earth

Consider the sky in contrast to the world it watches over. It is present with us in a wide array of colors and attitudes. Clear skies with sunshine, clouds, rain, snow, and dark nights all nourish the earth in so many ways. And yet with all the faces it presents, it is completely free of the fretfulness of our earthly concerns. And above all the cloud cover and changing weather, there is the constant serene and peaceful blue.

I think that the sky in all its aspects teaches us about God's love and that remembering to look up and listen for its lessons can bring us real peace. The sky is not partial. It does not show favoritism. It is boundary-less, shedding its benefits on all, without prejudice.

It reminds us of the spirit of Jesus who, when he was on earth, never let anyone tell him who he could be friends with. He walked with God's love through all the social barriers that people used to isolate one group from another. And the sunshine of his love had no boundaries.

Child of Heaven and Earth

It would be easy to look up at the sky and think that there is no connection between that kind of boundary-less love that Jesus

practiced and the reality of our earthly lives. Here on the ground, we feel the need to be practical and to do a little shunning and excluding and showing of favoritism, even though we know that, in doing so, we perpetuate the very divisions we long to escape from.

It may seem impossible to love with the boundary-less-ness of the sky in a backstabbing world. But our faith promises us that we can “love like the sky” by remembering and living like Jesus.

The Steeple Points to God

I’ve never been a person who has been big on things that are fixed and unchangeable. I say this, because things that are fixed and unchanging can become outdated and irrelevant.

But I also think that it is good that some things are fixed, because some things are permanent and unchanging. And one of the unchanging truths that I feel good about is the way the steeples on our churches points toward the sky, away from our preoccupation with ourselves and to the mystery of God.

I think it is good that we have this fixed finger pointing to God, because another thing that seems pretty fixed is the way we human beings

seem to be constantly in the habit of not looking up. And perhaps the fact that church steeples are such a costly expression of our devotion, in some ways helps to emphasize how important it is for us, (just as it was for the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet) that we continue to preserve this expensive finger that points away from ourselves to the true object of our devotion and source of our salvation.

I do not wish to suggest that this is the only way to see our relationship with the physical plant. Some of you who are new members are here in part because the cost was finally unsustainable where you were. And you will have valuable insights to share about that journey. And I believe that we can only know the course we must take as the future unfolds and the Holy Spirit reveals it to us.

But for now, I want to just own how much these church buildings have served as an expression of my own devotion.

Whenever I enter or drive by a New England town and see that church steeple rising from its center, I feel that it is like a defiant little finger, pointing away from ourselves and all the things that trouble me about this world and toward the one who so many try to represent and speak

for, but who alone owns my heart and has my devotion. And for that reminder, I will always be grateful.