

Holy Ground

For some of us the phrase “Holy Ground” doesn’t mean very much. In fact, unless we have visited a church, synagogue, mosque or another place of worship as part of our spiritual journey, it is seldom discussed. There is one exception to that claim. The ground upon which someone is killed in the line of duty, whether a member of our military forces, a law enforcement officer or another first responder, is often sacred.

We have only to do a little research to discover some of the poetry from World War I that attests to this. I remembered enough of a poem by John McCrae from the first World War to find his famous poem “In Flanders Fields.” The first two lines are, “In Flanders fields the poppies blow, Between the crosses row on row.” Flanders is an area in Belgium that was the site of fierce fighting and death for many men. I am especially moved by pathos in the next quatrain:

“We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and how we lie,
In Flanders fields.”

Poets often give voice to people or situations in which our usual prose language simply does not do justice to the immense suffering that ordinary people like us experience when our losses as individuals or as a nation threaten to overwhelm us. The poet who sees the whole picture is able to put into imagery what cannot be accurately described yet must somehow be acknowledged and saved for posterity. The poet does this not only to help us to remember history but also to open the doors of our souls to recognize, remember and hopefully not reenact these terrible experiences again.



However, most of us need a tangible sign that this suffering or loss is not forgotten. For many of us, poetry does not adequately express the reality of our loss. We need to visit or at least read about places, “Holy Ground” as some of us describe it, where we can find the reminders that those who died were people who mattered. Sadly, they can no longer talk to us, hold us or otherwise express their love for us and our nation and the poem from WW1, “In Flanders Fields,” recognizes the importance of the cemeteries for these fallen soldiers, as well as the need to never forget why they lived and why they died. Of course, wherever these public servants are buried or interred is often understood to be sacred or “Holy Ground.”

Finally, I marveled at the effort put forth after the disasters of the attacks of the United States on 9/11(2001). After collisions, destruction and death the American people put forth an immense and costly effort to retrieve every bit of human remains possible. Knowing that all of the nearly

3000 bodies of those who died in the three crash zones could not be fully recovered, these sites became places to remember those who died. Each year thousands of people remember. They may or may not regard the site(s) of their loved ones deaths as sacred events. But surely we can recognize the places where they were killed as “holy ground.”

Other than cemeteries and places where people have died defending a person or a nation, are there other locations which are “Holy Ground?” In my experience as a young man watching my father’s casket being lowered into its grave, it meant that his death was something that deserved recognition and remembering. I can still, 56 years later, remember the location, the pastor praying for my dad and then speaking to my mother. I could give you directions to the location of his grave even now.

Another example, one that we acknowledge every year on Memorial Day, is the sheer number and sizes of cemeteries dedicated as final resting places for veterans who have died. We see the ceremonies either in person or as we watch televised reports from Arlington National Cemetery as well many other cemeteries all across our nation. Bouquets of flowers mark places that are sacred to individual families and friends.

However, there are places besides cemeteries and houses of worship that are sacred to people like us. One of my favorites is a small mountain known as Mount Wachuset in Princeton, Massachusetts (USA). I used to enjoy climbing (actually walking up a road) to the top. Often, I walked alone on such a journey. One day when I was around 19 years old, I started walking up this small mountain/hill thinking it was just a cloudy day. Partway up it was raining but only lightly. By the time that I got to the top of the mountain it was raining like it was determined to cleanse the mountain of whatever it needed cleansing from.

When I approached the so-called “Summit House,” I was overwhelmed with the sheer power on display as lightning crackled all around me. It could not have been further away than 100 feet, vertically or horizontally, if that. I knew that this might not be the best place to stand and watch for very long, but, on the other hand, I was in awe of the sheer power that was on display. Even being that young I knew that I was not supposed to stay here very long. There was power at work that I could not describe or define. It was a blessing and a privilege to have seen and survived that lighting storm. Obviously, I left before something bad happened!

There is another dimension to this experience of what I think of as “The Holy” at work. “The Holy” is a term that I have chosen for my own way of referring to God. I do not think of the term as any more of a description of God as any of the other terms for God. However, it helps me to focus on the sheer impossibility of describing the One whom we try so hard to name and describe. Yet the impossibility of the task does not prevent me from recognizing those times when I have realized that I am in the presence of some One or something so big that I cannot pretend that it is not present. Lots of other people have had the experience of being in the presence of God and being blessed by the awareness of the power, the love and sometimes the sheer persistence of the Holy One in leading us on to paths we might otherwise never have taken.

Don’t think that it can’t happen to you. The story of the man who was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of their captivity and enslavement in Egypt (Exodus 2) is interesting at first because he is just a shepherd. “Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the

mountain of God.” (Exodus 3:1). However, he is soon led into an epiphany and experience of God’s power in his life, when he drew near to a bush that appeared to be both burning and not being damaged by the fire.

The ancient Jewish people who told this story generation after generation until it was finally written down, would recognized several signs of God’s presence. Horeb was a mountain known/believed to be one that God descended onto. There is fire which, by itself, was a sign of God’s presence. The fire did not consume the bush---another indicator that God was there. The presence of the angel was another way to say that God is here.

The relevance of this story to those who are not already alerted to signs that God is truly with us is that there is no reason for us NOT to be encountered by God. We are neither too holy nor too unholy, neither too good nor too evil, neither too limited in our understanding of God nor too “good” to need to know more about God. We may be anxious about sharing our story with most people. That is understandable unless we are already in a Christian spirituality group. In that instance, the group can grow as each member shares their stories of spiritual growth and obstacles to a life of spiritual growth. However, but there are pastors, spiritual directors, Pastoral counselors, Clinical Pastoral Education supervisors, chaplains and other believers in the “Holy One” who are interested in your story as an indicator of God’s activity in your life.

I learned about the importance of approaching each person with respect for the love that God has for that person from one of my District Superintendents in Maine. Speaking to us about the importance of this respect for each person who would come to us as pastors seeking our help he said, “Take off your shoes (when she or he comes to you for spiritual guidance), for you are standing on holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

As always, I welcome your [responses](#).

Rev. Larry LaPierre

1 September 2018