

Rev. Julie Belman

Bethel UMC - UMW Woman of the Year & Choir robe consecration Sunday

Ephesians 1

Sanctuary For All

On Thursday, morning, Dan Toma stopped by my office to share some information with me about our beautiful sanctuary and its intentional design. He gave me a copy of this lovely brochure, put together by our architect - the late great John Califf, with the help of the also late and great Pastor, Fred Reese.

I enjoyed the chance to learn more about our beautiful and distinctive worship space. I am going to work with our communications team to make this pamphlet available to our members and visitors, as I think it could serve as a wonderful tool for inviting, and engaging folks in our worship space.

Because that's what we want - right? To invite and engage as many people as possible in the life-changing Good News of Christ Redeeming Love.

Now I asked this question at our Reach! Service and only Debbie Carter knew the answer: What is our Church motto??. (*how many people know it?*) "Knowing, Loving, Serving... so the WORLD will experience Christ's Love"

We say all the time, "All are Welcome". But we want to make sure that it's true. That this space is accessible; That we are doing the ministry we are called to do, That we are actually able to truly accommodate everyone who walks through our doors.

I've been thinking a lot about this space. As our worship team meets for the first time this week, As I just officiated my first Bethel funeral, As I prepare to attend my first Bethel wedding, And as I get to know more about who we are as a church - I have been meditating a lot on the word "Sanctuary." I invite you to join me in this focus today.

And let's begin with a few questions:

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 were baptized in this room, raise your hand.

If your child was baptized in this room, raise your hand.

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

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

If you have experienced the Love of Jesus Christ in this room, raise your hand.

My friends, there has been a lot of life is shared in this space. Thanks be to God!

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 Methodist folks in Forest Acres have gathered to worship since 1835, and in this room since 1964. Oh, if these walls could talk. . . .

Think about the “rules” of Sanctuary. 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, my brother and I would go over to the pew where Mr. Porter sat, and he would sneak us a stick of gum. He was one of our favorite church people.

Gum wasn’t allowed in the Sanctuary! It was holy! But you know what? Henry Porter’s gum-sneaking enterprise is what made that room into a sanctuary for me. Because... this place is holy — NOT because of the furnishings, or the wood paneling or pews, or hymnals, or lack of screens on the wall — Truly no offense to John Califf, but 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 me to our second definition of “*Sanctuary*”. A sanctuary is a place of refuge and protection. I mean, really, the two definitions are bound together. 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 the sanctuary feel like a safe place of refuge and protection.

- But when we were welcomed as a newcomer,
- When the church laid hands on us at our confirmation,
- When we were prayed over before leaving on a mission trip,
- When an old man snuck us forbidden gum before the opening hymn,
- When we shared life together, joys and tears!
- When we met God in worship, in the waters of baptism, breaking bread at the table...
- This place became holy.
- This place became refuge.

For our scripture text today, I read to you 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 Christians in the city of Ephesus, the Ephesians. They are people he loved dearly. He started this church. Baptized

them. Married them. 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.

My friends, hear the Amazing Good News: this power — it's the same power that raised Christ from the dead. That's the kind of power at work within the church at Ephesus — and it is the same power that is at work with us here at Bethel! Thanks be to God!

Paul ends the prayer with this magnificent image: He says, "*God has put all things under Christ's 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.

Eugene Peterson's Message translation puts it like this, "*At the center of all of this is Christ... The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church... and it is here that Christ fills everything with his presence.*"

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* from this place *out* 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 a 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 - a fountain overflowing. We are not called to be on the periphery - the edges. We are called to be the center - to offer sanctuary to all.

And I've seen it happen. Already, in my short time with you, I've seen lives changed in this place. I've seen the altar table covered in schools apples you brought for the children of Epworth. 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 very room, you've been the church. Thank you, my friends.

Our call to worship for the month of September is a weekly reminder of who we are called to be. "*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 oh my friends, 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.

My friends, have YOU ever felt the welcoming presence of God in this space?? Yes... me too. It's not the well designed walls, it's not the incredible architecture, it's not the beautiful stained glass — it's YOU — God's presence in *you* — that's what makes Bethel a holy place of refuge.

May we leave the holiness of this space today, and go out into the world with this message: that Bethel United Methodist Church is making room, so that all can be experience God's welcoming presence in this space. Amen? Amen.

LET US PRAY: Almighty God, our creator redeemer sustainer, we have heard your word of power and blessing. May it give us a spirit of wisdom, that our eyes and hearts may be opened, and that we may know the hope to which we have been called. Amen.