



HOLY GROUND

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Lord, we are thankful for Holy Ground Moments. For those times in our lives, and those places where, you become tangible to us. Reminding us that you are right here with us and that you keep us no matter where we may go. Be with us now as we remove our sandals and approach you as if this is Holy ground. In your wonderful Son Jesus Christ's name we pray, amen.

When was the last time you approached "Holy Ground"? This is a question put forth today in order to make us think some more about how we ought to approach such experiences and spaces. Many would say we are on Holy Ground right now and I would certainly agree with that statement. But is it really Holy Ground if we don't treat it as such? In many churches you are not allowed to bring a cup of coffee into the sanctuary, while in others there is a coffee bar in the entry way or narthex of the sanctuary so you don't have to make an extra stop for some on your way to church.

Once, while a group of us were preparing for one of our Sunday Night Youth Worship Services, up in the third floor Living Room, one

of our seminarians happened to put the cup that she was drinking water out of on the little end table that we were going to be using as the communion table for worship that day. The challah bread was set out and covered on its plate and the grape juice had been poured into the chalice and we were getting pretty close to beginning the worship service. Well, the water cup, which happened to be a Dunkin Donuts clear plastic cup, was still sitting there next to the elements and it disturbed one of our participating Elders. To the point which they removed the cup from the table. At first one of the seminarians thought, “Gosh, that’s pretty extreme isn’t it. It’s just a water cup and we all need some water because we’ve been teaching for a while and still have quite a bit to go.” But then, in that moment, they realized that that table was, and is, Holy Ground for that Elder. That the institution of communion, which is one of our only two sacraments, is one of the holiest of Holy Grounds to him and that it sure ought to be for the rest of us as well. In that occasion, we all had a different understanding of our approach to said Holy Ground but it also got all of us to stop and think for a little bit about it.

How does each one of us approach Holy Ground when we have the opportunity to do so? Here we are finding ourselves at a Sunday morning church worship service. So if this is Holy Ground, what did each of us do to prepare our minds, our hearts and our souls to approach this this space, this moment, this experience? Did we, or do we, have

rituals that we do to get ourselves ready to meet God here on a Sunday morning? Did we, or do we, have prayers that we say before we get here? In other words, what is our equivalent to removing our sandals as we approach God? Perhaps we can learn from our brothers and sisters up at the mosque on 96th Street. You see, they take their shoes off when they enter their house of worship. So what can we do as we prepare ourselves to approach God on a Sunday morning in our, or shall I say, God's House of Worship?

People do all sorts of diverse things in different traditions when they approach Holy Ground. Our senior pastor, Michael Lindvall, opens his hands heavenward, as if to receive the Spirit, when he prays. The posture of his hands seem to exemplify the same intention I have, or feeling I get, when I sing Spirit of the Living God Fall Afresh On Me in my head as I prepare myself for worship each Sunday. You see, before each church service that I am blessed to be a part of, I get nervous.

It didn't happen to me in prior occupations leading up to sales pitches nearly as much. You know why? Because when I'm coming in here I'm supposed to be walking on Holy Ground. Supposed to be leading you to the holy. That's why I get nervous, that's why I sing and pray to God to calm my heart and my nerves before I enter these gates and join you in worshipping the most Holy of Holies, the I Am Who I Am, the one was, and is, and is to be, the Great I Am.

There was one church service held here at Brick Church that so often stands out more than the rest. It was a morning when Michael was preaching on the Ten Commandments. And in the middle of his sermon, he left the pulpit, walked down those stairs, and he walked over to the lectern. Then he asked everyone to please rise and after everyone had stood he did a Reading of the Law. That was Holy Ground. That was a moment when I felt like we all removed our sandals and approached a burning bush that wasn't being consumed by the fire. That's an example of, and the reason why, we stand when we read the law here. A similar practice that is extremely impactful in many other churches is the culture where worshippers stand during the reading of scripture every time it is read.

Another act that has always seemed to be important to people when they approach God is the removal of their hat when they enter into a worship service or when they pray outside of one. For generations, people at church as well as parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, always seem to teach children to remove their hats as they bow their heads to pray.

Does God really care if we remove our hats or not when we pray, when we approach Him? Perhaps not. But I'm sure God does like it when we do something different when we address Him. When we do something that makes that time unlike the rest, and sets it apart from any other time in our lives. So that in those moments, when our hats are

being removed in order to enter into a time of prayer with God, it has become a method, or progression, of preparation in our approaching God. It is a preparing of the heart and mind that says, I'm not talking to myself, or informally to a friend right now, but rather I am meeting the great I Am face to face and it ought to be treated as such.

This is an example of why we teach the little ones here at Brick Church to clasp their hands and to bow their heads in prayer. It helps them to focus and it teaches them that they are speaking directly to God. That's why it sticks with them, as well as why it has stuck with many of us, and will continue to do so, for the rest of our lives. It's why so many churches have kneelers in their sanctuaries and why some prayers during their services are set apart with a time to kneel. And it's likely why someone made the decision for us to have kneelers tucked under our pews.

When my wife, Holly, and I have the opportunity to attend church together in the summer months, we often try and go to a Methodist Church service that is held on the beach. And, as you can imagine, it is quite a laid back and informal type of service. Occasionally there are strong winds, or worse, west winds which bring in the biting flies, or there are other distractions that God's beautiful creation brings forth, and therefore the worship leaders need to be prepared for such things. One of those elements that they need to be prepared for is the sun, so

typically many of the leaders in the band, as well as many of the worshipers, wear hats during the service.

Well, at the last service Holly and I attended, I noticed that the lead guitarist removed his hat during the reading of scripture. It had appeared that during most of the rest of the service he was wearing it but when the Word of God was being read, he humbled himself and bowed at the feet of God by simply removing his hat, bowing his head, and acknowledging that that part of the service was perhaps more holy than the rest. It was his way of preparing for, and entering into, Holy Ground, the holiest part of worship to him if you will.

While attending a class in seminary a sermon was played for us about communion and in that sermon the congregation was told to examine themselves, to really check themselves, before going up to the altar to receive communion. The preacher told the parishioners to look deep within themselves and to see what was going on. To seek out what dark or ugly things people were holding on to before they approached the table. He said that if you haven't apologized to your brother for doing something wrong, or if you have an outstanding debt, to get up out of your pew, to head out the door, and to go and take care of it, to remedy whatever it is that needs remedying, before approaching communion. Because communion is Holy Ground. Therefore, when we approach Holy Ground we need to check ourselves, to do a reassessment

of what's right and what's wrong with our lives, with our hearts, and to address those things. To change who we are before we continue on.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, in many ways it's like New Year's Day as we finish the summer and head into the fall before going into the dark months of winter, so maybe we can choose to all take a moment and examine ourselves before we approach communion today. And then when we have some more time over the next two days set apart even more time to do a thorough self-assessment, re-evaluation, of what our priorities are and where God stands in those priorities. Use it as a time to put some stakes in the ground and carve out portions of our days, weeks, months, and years to meet God on Holy Ground in many different ways, shapes and forms.

And let's take it a step further. Other than Sunday morning worship services, what do we do to seek out Holy Ground? Like take a walk and simply pray and have no other agenda. One member here at the church lives over on the Upper West Side, and when she has time to, she chooses to walk across the park on her way to church meetings and various other church events. And she uses that time as a way to unplug from the world and engage in some one-on-one time with God. Sometimes she prays and sometimes she just tries to listen. But either way it is a Holy Ground kind of moment for her, and in fact, it is a time of preparation on her way to the church.

There are many people who love to walk on the beach and pray when they are on vacation, or others who walk up to the ocean's edge, or in our case the reservoir or one of the two rivers, to look out and pray to God on a daily basis. Perhaps in that moment they may sense their Creator in the form of the Spirit, or Ruach as Genesis teaches us. In that moment, they may sense the Spirit who rushed over the watery chaos bringing order to life. Maybe that's why the ocean and other large bodies of water are so Holy for people. Or maybe it's because they gain a sense of awe at the expanse of it, being reminded of how little we all are, how small our worries and concerns are, how amazing it is that a God so great cares to know our name, and perhaps more simply, just how Great God is.

What places do you go to to meet God on Holy Ground? As we begin a new school year and a new church program year, think about more ways you can seek to meet God on Holy Ground in your life. Think about ways in which you can set apart time just for you and God. And ways you can do something different that sets that time apart. New ways, or old forgotten ways, to prepare your heart, mind and soul to meet God in the proverbial burning bush as Moses did so many years ago.

Is there a place, a room, a chair, or somewhere in particular in your apartment you can meet God each morning before you do anything else?

Or perhaps where you can meet with God in the evening before it's time to turn the lights out and head to bed?

In Confirmation Class, we have the eighth graders draw a picture of their favorite place in their house and teach them to work on their reflections in that place. To sit there, take a moment and say a prayer, before doing their "homework", A.K.A. their reflections, so they recognize that in that very act they are not just doing another work assignment but rather meeting with God. In this, we are trying to teach them to make it a time set a part so that they engross themselves in a moment with God not just complete another task. So, is there a place in particular where we can each center ourselves and participate with God?

Maybe when we are at home and we read scripture, or enter into a time of prayer, we simply start to light a candle to be reminded that we are in the presence of God. That God is right here with us, calling out to us from the burning bush, just as He called out to Moses and told Him to do something different so many years ago.

Following today's service, let's all go out and think of what we can do differently and routinely to prepare ourselves for entering into and standing on Holy Ground. And let's also remember to be sure and examine ourselves prior to meeting the Holy so we can be more attentive to living holier lives than we already do.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

