

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman
August 4, 2013
The Rt. Rev. Morgan Porteus
Bishop of Connecticut, Retired

I was very moved last Sunday at the Anniversary Service of this congregation and building. First, hearing Tom Coburn, who, though young, was part of the original group of sixty years ago. And second, hearing the Necrology read again—the names of all those people, now gone, who have been part of St. James from its beginning until now. Those two things brought a couple of bits of early history to mind about this building.

First vignette. The first services of this congregation were held at the Congregational Church in Wellfleet, for a year or so. There was occasional talk of a building. One particular Sunday after the service many of us walked down Main Street to the Blakeslee's. Olav Hammarstrom was there with plans for this building. There was excitement everywhere—especially in Jim Pike. I guess I had been thinking along traditional lines—a Cape Cod building like some quaint older ones around still. Jim came over and asked if I liked the proposal. I said I did not. I was disappointed. He was disappointed in me. I went home.

About 4 PM a knock came at my door. It was Jim. He said he wanted to talk about the Chapel. And he did, with his usual enthusiasm. He always seemed to quietly overwhelm me. And he did again, and left me with many words to think about—which I did all winter long, to the consternation of some in my parish. He stretched my thinking and I began to change. John Coburn once said of Jim's preaching, "It was always a three-part sermon. Yes, I've heard that first part many times before. Yes, the second part, that's known to me. But part three was always pure Pike." That was so like my meeting with him that afternoon—it was himself, his presence, that was so convincing.

Second vignette. The land had been given and cleared. Only one tree was lost. The design of the Chapel was agreed to. It was August again and the outline of the Chapel had been traced by strings on the ground. Now it was time—the day—to bless the land. I assisted Jim at the Congregational Church that morning and he asked me to assist him at the blessing of the ground.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'll tell you later."

We rode, fully vested, to the Chapel site. "What am I to do?"

"Tell you later."

We climbed to the site and stepped around the strings marking the Chapel. Strings for the boundaries, strings for the Table, strings for the pews and the rail. Strings everywhere. And, suddenly, it *was* later. We stood where the Table was to be—in the center. He opened a book, read a prayer, thrust the book into my hands, pointed to a paragraph, and said "Read that." He took the book, he read, gave the book, I read, and then again. Finally, he made the sign of the cross in the sand and said "Amen." And the ground was blessed—I think.

Third vignette. This building was now in use—by a month or so. We came in August to Wellfleet—two adults, three boys, a collie dog—all in a station wagon towing a boat so heavily loaded with all kinds of things that I was worried about tires going flat. That was August 1, a Saturday. After unpacking, making beds, going to the store (you know the routine), I was tired and went to bed at 7:30 or so, to read. At 8 PM, the door opened and there was Jim. Then he stood in the door to my room. We made pleasantries and laughed, and then he said, “Just stopped by to tell you that you are the celebrant tomorrow at 9:30.” My protests were loud and real.

“I can’t do that. I’ve never been in the Chapel.”

To which he smilingly said, “You’ll have to, because I am on my way right now to Watch Hill, Rhode Island, where I preach tomorrow.” And, with a smile, he was gone.

The only comfort was that he had said there would be a preacher and an assistant here with me tomorrow. It was a kind of upsetting night.

I came to the Chapel the next morning bewildered and a bit angry at Pike. I don’t remember vesting. I don’t remember the procession. I don’t remember taking the first part of the service.

Suddenly, I do remember walking through that gate and standing at that Table. It was different from standing at an altar with my back to the congregation—saying and doing everything by myself, alone. And now here I stood at this simple Table, in the middle of friends and strangers, with a sense of being one with family around this dining room table.

I had never stood in a place like this before—everyone taking part in word and action. It was as if they were the body and I was their voice and hands. The only word that came to mind was “holy”—Holy Place and Holy Event. I had never had a definition of that word that made sense to me. And here I stood engulfed in that holiness.

So, in its simple beauty, this place is what Holy is to me ever since.

Fourth vignette. Finally, a few years later, the Chapel was paid for. Bishop Anson Phelps Stokes, the Bishop of Massachusetts, was here to consecrate it. The joyous service began, and now it was time for his sermon. He stepped into the pulpit, said a prayer. And we all sat down as we always do and got settled.

And he stood there, and stood there, and stood there, with no words forthcoming. It was very quiet. No one coughed. And then quietly he spoke, almost to himself:

This is the most fearsome pulpit in which I have ever stood,
for I suddenly realize that every word I will speak to you
will go across that Table before it reaches you.

A simple building, a simple table. A group of friends and strangers looking at each other across that same table. That is where forgiveness is born. That is where acceptance climaxes. Sharing the same words and actions, and becoming one with each other though still being different from each other. Being made one around this table when the Lord comes as he promised, to give himself to each of us and all of us. For me, that is the mystery and wonder in breaking bread and pouring wine at this table in our midst.

Twice my life has been changed here, as it has never been before or since. These two times are at the heart of my belief.

Having forgotten what little theology I may have had, and having withdrawn a good deal from the institutional church, and finding a nearness of God in relationship—it is now enough for me to stand in this simple building before that Table, and echo Jacob in the Old Testament, who awoke from a dream of angels ascending to and descending from heaven and said:

Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.

This is none other than the gate of heaven.

To which I add what I know to be true: This place—right here—is holy ground.