

If This Is Not a Place?

Psalm 42

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]

Today I want to tell you about one of the most moving worship services I ever attended. Although it occurred years ago, I still vividly remember the service. The worship service was held in Dallas, Texas. Instead of a sermon, the message that day was given by a blind musician named Ken Medema. ***[slide: photo of Ken Medema]*** Ken Medema walked to the piano, sat down, and began to play. He began by singing a phrase over and over, in a sort of eerie way, "Does anybody know my name? Does anybody know my name?" At first, he did not reveal his name. Instead, he told us about going to church one Sunday. He said everybody at church looked so nice with their Sunday clothes on. Everybody smiled at one another and said, "Good morning, how are you?" "I'm fine, thank you." The music was warm and bubbly. The preacher rattled off religious platitudes and offered easy answers to complex questions. Everybody seemed to be happy and have it all together. But as this man left the church, he realized that nobody knew his name.

Once again he sang, "Does anybody know my name?" Finally, he revealed his name. He disclosed his secret. His name was . . . Struggler. He was struggling with life, and he was struggling with faith. And because that was true, his visit to that church was less than satisfying. The easy answers, sweet Jesus songs, and smiling faces were not adequate for Struggler. He didn't need a place where everybody pretended to have it together or a place that offered slick and easy answers to hard questions.

He needed a place where it was OK to bring his questions and struggles and doubts. He needed a place where he could be vulnerable and real. At that point Ken Medema began to sing a deeply moving song called "*If This Is Not a Place.*" During the chorus of the song, Ken asked three important questions that I want to hang today's sermon on. He asked:

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- ***“If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?”***
- ***“If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?”***
- ***“If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?”***]

At its best, the Christian faith and Christian church offer such a place. We see that truth throughout Scripture, especially the Psalms, of which Psalm 42 is but one of many examples. So using Ken’s questions and passages from Psalm 42, let’s talk about the kind of place God wants the church to be.

“If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?”

Ken begins by asking, “If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly?” God’s church, of all places, needs to be a place where our spirits can take wing. A place where we can fly and soar and celebrate. The author of Psalm 42 knew that. In verse 4 he says, ***[slide (photo of church sanctuary full of people at worship) “I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.” (Ps. 42:4 NRSV)]***

In this verse the psalmist speaks of people joyfully celebrating at worship. The church of Jesus Christ should be a place where people can take wing and fly. It’s always troubled me that on Friday night church folks scream at football games, and on Saturday night they laugh and cry at the movies, but on Sunday morning at church they sleep! The only time Methodists say “hallelujah” is if it’s printed in the bulletin, and even then we don’t say it with much gusto.

Not long ago a member of the congregation asked me it was OK to say “amen” during church. I said it would be just fine. But I also asked them to bring their cell phone so they could call 911 if somebody had a heart attack! I came across a poem the other day about Methodist worship that said, “We sit in the pew where we always sit, and we do not shout ‘Amen!’ And if anyone yells or waves their hands, they’re not invited back again.” We need to remember that we gather in this place every week to celebrate the risen Christ in our midst.

Therefore, it's appropriate to fly and soar and celebrate. We don't have to be Pentecostals to do that, of course. But it's important to have a place where we can laugh and sing and soar and celebrate, and church is that kind of place.

“If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?”

In his song Ken also asks the question, “If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?” God's church, of all places, should be a place where we can cry. A place where our pain and tears are welcome and understood and allowed. The writer of Psalm 42 felt free to cry to God. In verse 3 he said, *[slide: (photo of woman crying): “My tears have been my food day and night.” (Ps. 42:3)]* The psalmist felt the freedom to take his tears to God, and so should we. Even Jesus cried. One of the most powerful verses in the Bible is “Jesus wept.” He wept because his dear friend Lazarus had died, and he was not ashamed of his tears. Neither should we. In fact, the Bible tells us that we should “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15 NRSV).

I read recently about a Catholic church in Macon Georgia called St. Joseph's Church. In the back of the sanctuary hangs an intriguing sign, which says, “CRY ROOM.” The “cry room” is actually a nursery at the back of the sanctuary. It's for parents of small children. If their babies start crying during mass, they can go to the soundproof room and still see and hear the Mass without bothering other members.

I've thought a lot about that sign. I've decided that every sanctuary in the world should have a sign that says CRY ROOM. The cry room shouldn't just be for babies, but for grownups too. The entire sanctuary should be a cry room. A place where people can bring their deepest pains and hurts and griefs and losses and failures and sins and brokenness and not be ashamed to cry before God and before one another. A place where tears are voiced not silenced, acknowledged not denied. A place where people can cry, where tears are understood, and where hope and grace and love can help dry them.

“If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?”

I want us to consider one more question. In his song Ken also asks, “If this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?” God's church, of all places,

should be a place where hard questions can be asked. The psalmist knew that. Psalm 42:9 reads, **[slide (photo of man looking forlorn): “I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’” (Ps. 42:9 NRSV)]** The psalmist was not afraid to ask hard questions of God, and neither should we. It’s OK to have questions and doubts and struggles. God can take it. The church can take it. We may not have easy answers, but it’s OK to ask the questions and to seek the answers. Authentic faith is not afraid to ask hard questions. Jesus did. On the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46 NRSV). We must never be afraid to ask hard questions about life and God and faith. The church must always be a place where people can ask and seek and struggle.

In a recent editorial in *The Christian Century*, editor John Buchanan references Elaine Pagels’ book *Beyond Belief*. **[slide: front cover of book]** She begins her book by telling about standing in a church vestibule. She is not a churchgoer. But a few days earlier, she and her husband received the crushing news that their two-year-old son was terminally ill. She said: “Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. . . . Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon your child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. . . . Here is a family that knows how to face death.” (*“A Place to Mourn,” The Christian Century [June 15, 2010], 3.*)

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Elaine Pagels was expressing the need to belong to a community of faith that knows how to be real. Living out authentic, honest humanity is one of God’s great dreams for the church. As Ken Medema’s song so eloquently expresses, “If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly? And if this is not a place where my tears are understood, where can I go to cry? And if this is not a place where my questions can be asked, where shall I go to seek?” The Christian faith and the Christian church offer such a place. A place to fly, a place to cry, and a place to seek. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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