

The Church Building (how it may impact your spirituality)

In a recent sermon I spoke of the role that beauty can play in our spiritual lives, particularly as it relates to the arts and nature, but have you ever considered how the church building itself impacts our spirituality and worship? The earliest Christians generally held their worship services in people's homes, but when they did begin to build church buildings the church was primarily still located within Roman culture, and so the church buildings tended to echo forms of Roman architecture. Some aspects of the buildings that were originally intended to glorify the emperor were refused on Jesus Christ. In the centuries that followed church buildings went through a number of architectural styles, with their layouts designed to convey theological, spiritual, and liturgical thoughts and feelings. Consider, for example, Gothic churches from the late Middle Ages, such as Chartres Cathedral, or Norte Dame in Paris. Everything from the great spires and flying buttresses on the exterior, to the towering columns and high vaulted ceilings are intended to draw the eye upwards towards heaven.

Our own sanctuary actually is laid out in a way referred to as cruciform, which was first designed within Romanesque and Gothic churches. By way of explanation - the portion of the sanctuary where you all sit is called the nave, which has a central aisle that runs all the way up through the choir loft to the structure that hold the candles, flowers, large Bible and a cross. This part of the interior is called the chancel. The aisle that runs across the front of the sanctuary is called the transept. As the center aisle and transept connect, they create the shape of a cross - therefore, it is cruciform. Also, the chancel is raised higher than the nave in a way that is meant to draw your eyes towards the cross.

The placement of the building can also make a particular statement. For example, many of the earliest New England churches were built at the very center of the village, or at the point of highest elevation in town. This was a reminder for the Puritan inhabitants that the church was central in their lives. It was also the case that the churches pulpit stood in a prominent position, often in the very center of the chancel. This was to say that the Word of God was central in their worship, whereas, in many Roman Catholic Churches the altar takes center stage pointing to an emphasis on the sacraments. (By the way, the word altar refers to a place of sacrifice. In our Reformed Churches we do not perform sacrifices, thus, we do not have altars. We simply refer to them as the communion table, or the Lord's Table. In Roman Catholic liturgical theology, communion is thought of as a form of sacrifice, therefore they do have altars.)

The sanctuary of a church should be seen as 'sacred space'. Theologian, Paul Tillich, "urged that a church building should elicit a response even apart from its liturgical use, that the space should give people an experience of "the presence of the holy...even before anything else happens within this space." Or as a monk once said of his church, it "prays of itself". (From "Theology in Stone", by Richard Kieckhefer)

Church buildings do have a way of speaking to us. The next time you are in the sanctuary stop for a moment and contemplate how it may impact your spirituality.

Peace, grace, and love,
David