

## BUILDING ON SACRED GROUND

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Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Somehow the controversy around the so-called Ground Zero mosque got swept up into the appointed gospel lesson for today. On Tuesday I had both my eyes fixed on the gospel story about Jesus healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath but my concentration was continually interrupted by shrill voices protesting the building of a mosque near Ground Zero, *ground* which many people consider sacred the way the ruler of the synagogue in today's gospel story considered the Sabbath to be sacred *time*.

The guardians of the Sabbath wanted to protect sacred time from inappropriate infringement. And that, to me, sounded a bit like the squabble around the New York City mosque.

Look, they said to Jesus, we don't mind if you heal this woman; *just don't do it on the Sabbath*. You're more than welcome to heal her, but do it on some other day. After all, we have very strong feelings about the Sabbath. It's holy.

To all of that Jesus basically said, you're right. The Sabbath is holy. What a great time to set a woman free from her crippling bondage.

And the Sabbath was the perfect day to set a body free from bondage *unless you'd forgotten what made the Sabbath holy in the first place*. And, as we will discover, Ground Zero may be the perfect spot for building a mosque *unless we've forgotten what makes America holy ground in the first place*. As it turns out, there's a lot more to the holiness of American soil than Ground Zero.

The lesson for today:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

Jesus answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? So, then, should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free *on the Sabbath day* from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (Luke 13.10-17)

I've been following this noisy squabble for about a week. Leaders in both political parties oppose the center and leaders in both parties support it. I've read numerous articles in the New York Times including interviews with Muslims. Some Muslims are for it; some against it. The families of the 9/11 victims are divided. Some for; some against.

In one sense it's none of our business. It's for New Yorkers to decide. But in another sense it is our business because it raises the question of what is *truly holy* about America.

But first a few facts. The so-called Ground Zero mosque is actually two blocks from Ground Zero but close enough in the minds of many to contaminate the holiness of the site. It's actually a *community center* not a mosque per se. It will have a swimming pool, basketball court, and museum honoring victims of 9/11, some of whom, in case you hadn't heard, were Muslims. The proposed building is a community center. But not just any center. It is an *Islamic Community Center* and for many: "say no more."

The center's imam Mr. Abdul Rauf is of the *Sufi* branch of Islam, a form of Islam that is open, tolerant, peaceful and pluralistic much like Hafiz whose sentiments about religion we just heard as our first lesson ("Would You Think It Odd?"). Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda hate Rauf-type Muslims, which should happily make him our ally. You'd think so. But *feelings* often undermine *thinking*, which, by the way, is why we are governed by a constitution and not the whims and tantrums of a monarch or the whims and tantrums of popular opinion. Thank God for the Constitution, which keeps our temperamental feelings in check.

And finally on our list of facts, the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were executed by nineteen *criminals* blinded by an extremely perverted form of Islam not unlike others who have slaughtered thousands in the name of Christ and under the sign of the cross. *Please, we say, don't paint all Christians with that brush.*

Apparently many Americans aren't willing to see differences within Islam, a historic religious tradition as diverse as Christianity. Do we consider all born again Christians "abortion doctor murderers" because one was? Do we consider all Orthodox Christians "mass murders" because the Serbian warlord Milosevic and his henchmen were? Do we consider all Catholics "terrorists" because, well, don't you know about those bombings in Northern Ireland?

Actually, Catholics were suspect in this country from the beginning. Their loyalty to America was suspect during the French and American War. In fact, if it hadn't been for a few outspoken Quakers, Catholics would not have been permitted to build a church in Philadelphia in the 18th century. Catholics were considered alien, unclean, dangerous, "other" as were Jews and Mormons in other times and places—as are Muslims now.

*You are unfit*, say some Americans. *You are unfit and unworthy to stand or kneel near our holy ground. Anywhere but here.*

And thus we shackle the souls of American Muslims with indignities as surely as Satan bound the woman in today's gospel story. *Don't you dare stand up tall and look us in the eye as equals.*

*Any day but the Sabbath*, screeched the guardians of the Sabbath. *The Sabbath is holy.*

To which Jesus said: what better day. For Jesus, you see, remembered the origins and spirit of the Sabbath. Do you?

More than a thousand years before Jesus, his people had been slaves in Egypt. They were worked like mules. Day after day after day, one day just like the next, working like mules for hundreds of years.

But once Moses led them out of bondage he quickly instituted the Sabbath Day. One day in seven would be free of toil. It was a time to remember what it means to be "human." It was a time to be fully human, alive, joyful, free of the burden of doing. Moses, the Great Liberator in more ways than one, was determined to protect that day as *holy* lest his people turn themselves back into slaves of work. One day in seven to unplug, breathe, jump for joy. The Sabbath. Liberation and rest.

Guess what happen to that good idea? After a couple hundred years, the spirit of the day was corrupted and crushed by rules and regulations. The one day devoted to

release from bondage became itself an onerous burden. It was still called “holy” but it wasn’t.

Yes, Jesus could have waited until Monday or Tuesday. But he was looking for more than just one healing. He was looking to heal his people by calling them back to the Sabbath’s true holiness.

And that got me to thinking about Ground Zero. Have Americans forgotten what makes this land truly holy? It’s not the innocence or purity of its people. It’s not the blood that has been shed at Antietam or Ground Zero. What makes America holy is a radical idea, a conviction inscribed in our Declaration of Independence. *All people are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.*

That radical idea plus this revolutionary conviction we know as the First Amendment: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech.*

So, I was thinking if the subject comes up around you this week; I was thinking we could say in the way and in the spirit of Jesus: yes, of course, that Islamic Center or some other mosque should be built right at Ground Zero in order to show the world what is truly holy about America. That site may be hallowed. But there’s something even more hallowed about America. It’s the dream that proclaims all people equal and with the right to worship freely and in safety.

In case you’ve forgotten: we were all outsiders at one time. We are all lucky to have been accepted into this beautiful country. Protestants came to this country in the first place because they were unwelcome in their homelands. And should we not be the first to welcome Muslims who are not only children of Abraham like us but also children of God?

Last month, before the Ground Zero mosque made headlines, I met with several Muslims in their mosque in Hagerstown. Since Sept. 11, 2001, our two congregations have done several things together, including a summer day camp for Christian and Muslim children.

I went to their mosque to invite them to join us in prayers for peace between Christians and Muslims. No, we can’t change every heart and mind in the world. But we can begin in our own small world to change the negative stereotypes we hold against each other. Our Muslim friends are glad and eager to cooperate in such an endeavor.

Sunday evening, October 3, members of that community will join us here for PeaceFest, praying for peace between Christians and Muslims in our region, in our nation and in the world. And one of the prayers will be this one attributed to St. Francis. *Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love.*