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Sacred Places

Walk with me. The parking lot has been around for some time. There are cracks in the pavement and tufts of grass sticking out. The asphalt has been patched and sealed. And as best as we can judge they have done good work—but the parking lot doesn't appear to matter. There are better things to spend money on than a nicely paved parking lot. We walk toward the building, and begin to ask what kind of place is this? There are no large signs and we silently wonder how these throngs of people found their way here. Where they could be going is left only to the imagination. Headed for the doors, this shopping mall appears to have been given up long ago. I point out where J.C. Penny used to be. Sears was down at the other end. And this is my church—Mars Hill Bible Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. I show you inside, and we find our seats within *The Shed*—that's what they call the main worship space, I say. Facing the middle, we're sitting pretty near where the men's socks used to be, maybe. Without actually speaking, the question is asked, "what kind of church is this?" It is evident that this church is a people, not a building. In fact, there is little about the space that is reminiscent of the past. There is artwork, there is color, and there is light—there is no stained glass, or distinct architectural features. For all that has been proclaimed through beautiful cathedrals and chapels of antiquity, this space suggests something different.

On Mars Hill, near Athens, Greece, Paul addressed the Colossians on a number of topics. Among other things, he preached that the Lord does not dwell in temples made with hands. Paul, nearly 2,000 years ago was preaching that a Church is more than a building. Today we have discovered a building that tries to proclaim the same thing. In fact, this Church asserts that while a building may honor God in its reverent design and embellishment, there is little about a building that makes a Church, for as Paul has preached, the Church is more than a structure.

It takes some time to get over the fact that there is no pulpit. In fact, there's no lectern either. And there's no organ. There is a platform, surrounded by 3,000 grey plastic chairs. An enormous form of a cross, hewn from large timbers, stands prominently at center. Four projection screens hang above the platform, offering lyrics to worshippers in all 360 degrees. There is nothing inherent about the space that differentiates it from a theatre in the round. Excepting for one thing. There is an energy about the space—an energy that says that for all of the extravagance that this building doesn't claim, there must be something terrific going on here that makes it worthwhile.

And there's something else. There are other spaces of worship too. Down the long corridor, there's a youth area—right near where the Hallmark store might have been. And past that, on the right hand side, where the information booth and mall management was once housed, there now sits the welcome center. And the more we walk, and the more we talk, the more we begin to collectively come to terms with the fact that a church might not actually be about the building.

But that can't be! Surely a church says something about God, History insists. For thousands of years a community's most treasured resources have gone to constructing a house for God. Surely, History persists, the cathedrals and temples of old are of timeless value within the context of communal worship. Prove me wrong, I ask History. And my offer is obliged.

History brought me to Seattle to show me a church? And not even a historically situated church, but rather to a chapel built in the last decade? From a distance, the building looks like it was transplanted from 15th century Europe. We walk down the gentle grade and I follow the lead. A bit confused, my attention is directed to a reflecting pool. It must be 10,000 gallons, I silently ponder. The 2-foot-square box of wild grasses seems to float, suspended in time in the middle of the pond. "Chapel of St. Ignatius" is proclaimed in brilliant brass letters, set in stone. It is explained that the building—concrete by construction—was painted a Roman Ocher reminiscent of the stone used in the construction of Roman houses of worship. We step through the imposing entry doors—Alaskan yellow cedar, I am told—and into the narthex where a gigantic woolen rug memorializes an experience of Ignatius at the River Cardoner. Overtaken by the beauty of this place, my breath is quite taken from me. There is a great emphasis on light, I note, hardly able to find courage to speak at the risk of breaking the stillness of this most holy place. Perhaps feeling some satisfaction that History may have been right about the role of sacred places in religious practice, I discover that architect Steven Holl had a guiding vision for the construction of this space. "A Gathering of Different Lights." His vision was of

seven different colored bottles set within a stone box, with unique colors each reflecting a different aspect of Catholic worship. Moving forward, passing an exquisitely crafted baptismal font, and into the main sanctuary. There are pendant lamps suspended from the ceiling. It is explained to me that the hand-blown glass creates an organic pattern of filtered light. Continuing forward to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, I question what a Madrona tree is doing indoors. I consider asking, but have lost my breath to the beauty of this place. I fear that any words might bring me dangerously close to respiratory malady. Moving toward the middle of the main sanctuary, we stand in silence. Our heartbeats are distinct among the silence. And here, much like our earlier experience, there is a distinct energy—a distinct feeling that here, too, there must be something terrific afoot. In silence and without debate, we slowly move toward the door, careful that our footsteps do not create an irreverent noise.

Once outside, my friend History suggests we take a seat on that nearby bench. And here it is where our truest conflict is to come—we can feel it in our deepest parts. We both are conflicted. For all that the Apostle Paul had to say about the Lord not living in temples made by hand, I cannot ignore the volumes that the Chapel of St. Ignatius speaks of God. It is certain that such a place of beauty and design tells of an omnipotent God, worthy of our utmost creation. Such a place tells of a beautiful God. Such a place tells of an ancient but timeless God. Such a place tells of the God of our fathers, a God rooted in tradition, I finally verbalize, not excluding that it indeed tells also of the God of ourselves! And now History begins to put words to her own conflict. Indeed, she

begins, the beauty and elegance of old-world houses of worship speak wonderfully about our omnipotent God. But that does little to explain how a converted shopping mall can serve as an equally appropriate house of worship. For a shopping mall to become a house of worship speaks of an intimate and personal God, History concedes. It speaks of a God who cares more for his child than for a building. And it is in this context of discourse that we become unified in a single understanding. There is no building that can define God, but rather it is God that defines a building. To worship in a building or not does not change the character of God, however much we may indeed strive to the contrary. To worship in a has-been shopping mall or an old-world chapel does not define God. Rather, we must conclude, a house of worship is purely a physical manifestation of man's experience and understanding of God. For History has understood, and proven, that such an Almighty God is worthy of our finest buildings, and I have understood that God has revealed that there are focuses aside from congregational buildings. And it is in these two differing understandings that we have at last come to see our commonality. We can at last agree that even though scripture teaches that there is nothing about a building that makes a Church, it is fitting that we may honor The Almighty with the finest works of our hands. That is where History and I conclude our dialogue—in recognizing the value of both viewpoints, and worshipping God all the more fully in our new and broadened understanding.

This essay is based on personal experience at:

Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville Michigan, 49418
Chapel of St. Ignatius, Seattle University, Seattle Washington, 98112