
Open Sacred Places in a Violent World

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Like all people of good faith, I was horrified and pained by the violent murder of eleven people during worship at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on Saturday. I, and all people of good faith, denounce all such acts of hateful violence. When I came to church on the following Sunday, I anticipated questions and concerns about our own security here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. I walked past our familiar verse that the Cathedral is “a house of prayer for all people.”

But, after places of worship have been terrorized, we might ask the question from a different point of view. Is the Cathedral really open to all people? I know we say, “Yes,” in our initial and sincere welcome. But, over time, my answer is “No,” the Cathedral is not open to all people.

In fact, we at the Cathedral have asked people to leave. In our stewardship and care for all of God’s people, we have found some people’s behavior to be unacceptable and forbidden here. The latest person we asked to leave was harassing and abusing women. We had a history of telling him his behavior was unacceptable, but he persisted. Now, he is not allowed on the campus.

Last year, a man was here, constantly interrupting conversations and classes with obnoxious and abusive comments about foreigners and immigrants, using profanity. He genuinely scared people. We, our Cathedral canons, warned him over several weeks that his behavior was not allowed here; he failed to regulate himself, and then we told him to leave. He has not been back.

There are others. Yes, we are open to all people here. But we are not open to all behavior. The canons and staff of the Cathedral know when visitors, and sometimes even parishioners, are crossing the line of Christian grace and civility. Our responsibility is to be stewards of safety in this sacred place. We do not enjoy asking, and even ordering, people to leave this place. But we have done so, and we probably will, again.

For the record, we have had an armed off-duty police officer patrolling our Cathedral campus on Sundays, for some time. On certain occasions, that officer is also here on weekdays and evenings. Our Preschool doors, in particular, are always locked, throughout the entire day. Only staff have entry keys.

Still, we know that our beautiful and sacred campus is a public space. We were not built to be a fortress. We were built to be open and inviting to all. We depend upon a community, God’s gracious people, to help order and protect our prayer.

In fact, we were built to be a place of celebration and sanctuary in the midst of a world that can be chaotic and painful. On the Saturday evening after the synagogue massacre, I ran across a post from a Jewish friend of mine, a rabbi, who happened to be in a New York hotel that Saturday night, observing a bar mitzvah ceremony. He saw festive celebration, with Jews dancing the hora and lifting up people on a chair. He realized, even in his pain, that “joy is an act of resistance.” Even in pain, they were celebrating something.

That image, as communicated to me through my rabbi friend, has stayed with me. In the face of senseless tragedy, we certainly suffer and lament. There is no justification for it. However, our traditions and ritual also offer the solace of prayer

and public celebration.

One might say that celebrating our faith makes no sense in situations of violence and suffering. But, on the other hand, celebrating our faith makes all the sense in the world. Sometimes it can be our only response. I am committed to the Cathedral of St. Philip being an open place where faith and prayer are indeed celebrated, in good times and in bad. We belong to a different kingdom here at the Cathedral, a kingdom beyond violence and abuse and evil, beyond secular partisanship, and beyond ourselves. It is an honor to practice that faith, week in and week out, sometimes joyfully and sometimes painfully. We practice faith here. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who travail and are heavy laden; and I will refresh you."

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