
Where Are Your Altars?

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

A few weeks ago, Psalm 84 reminded me of the altars of our lives.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord. ... Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself ... at your altars, O Lord of Hosts. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. (Psalm 84:1-4)

Obviously, the word “altar” is a religious and a spiritual word. When we hear the word, most of us think of a church or religious shrine somewhere. Of course, altars in those places represent something holy to us. However, even those of us who do not consider ourselves religious have an altar somewhere. It is not necessarily at church, and it may be some special place in addition to our church altars.

An “altar” is where we worship, which is to say, where we affiliate and connect with a presence deeper than ourselves. At altars, we hear and see things that teach us; we experience things that touch us. In church, the altar is where we learn truth about ourselves, sometimes truth that is quite uncomfortable. Thus, we acknowledge and admit shortcomings at altars; sometimes we call that acknowledgement the confession of sins.

We also give thanks at altars. We become aware of something deeply gracious inside us, for which we are filled with a transcendent gratitude. Sometimes, we are prompted to radiate some sort of energy at altars. In church, we might sing or exclaim or simply smile.

But there are many altars in our lives besides the ones at churches. For me, the ocean beach is a kind of altar. There, I am prompted simply to sit still, to focus on observation and contemplation. I take in an expanse that is so much larger than I that I have a refreshed sense, and a humble sense, of my place in the wider world. The beach as altar also teaches me something about the rhythms of life; I see the tide roll steadily in and roll steadily out, just as cycles of my life roll in and out. Finally, of course, the very sound of waves is a kind of chant, sometimes quiet and sometime roaring, giving forth energy in the world.

There are other, not so transcendent altars in our lives, and they can be dangerous. The television screen has been compared to an altar, that tantalizing screen with its warm comforting glow and visionary entry into another world. Indeed, many of us use screens as altars to take us to a different world. Sometimes those (virtual) worlds can be positive and life-giving; but sometimes those screens take us to unhealthy places which threaten our wholeness.

The football and baseball fields of our lives can be types of altars—again, places where we connect with something larger than us, and often with lots of like-minded people. We feel somehow freer in those places, cheering rowdily in ways we might not dream of doing elsewhere. Indeed, the events we see on the fields often have the power to change us, to affect our moods, to bring us great joy or to drop us into despondency for an entire season! Football fields as altars can certainly seem unhealthy and even sacrilegious; but, on the other hand, good participation in sports can also show us truth about ourselves and about life. Sport can be dangerous and threatening to our examined lives, but there are occasions when it teaches us something wholesome and true.

There are other altars; and I believe we all have them, somewhere. Where are your altars? As you contemplate them and acknowledge them, consider whether they are positive or negative places for your soul. Are they providing new life for you,

or are they somehow dragging you down to torment and frustration?

Psalm 84 invites us to seek the altar which is the dwelling place of the Lord of Hosts, the Holy One of creation. I seek that holy place, that dwelling place of God, in all the churches and beaches and mountains of the world. There are good and life-giving altars in other places, too. It is good to examine those places and to consider whether they are places where we experience life and love. If so, they are the dwelling place of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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