

SANCTUARY: THE FACE OF JUSTICE

Ruth Rosenbaum, TC, PhD

During the month of December, I was fortunate to be able to travel to Amsterdam for the first meeting of the Global Reporting Initiative's Stakeholder Council. Representatives from many sectors and many parts of the world were gathering to discuss sustainability. It is an amazing experience to be gathered with people from so many parts of the world: Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. Slowly we began to get to know each other. Slowly we began to share ideas and possibilities.

Following the meeting, I had some time to visit Amsterdam. Friends had recommended the Anne Frank Museum and so two companions and I walked to the Museum.

It is a rather ordinary building, set amid so many others that have weathered time and human action through the decades. It is rather bare inside. There were frames on the walls of the rooms, explaining who had lived where and what each room was for. The plaques explained how preparations were made for the Frank family to go into hiding, so close to the rooms where the Frank business continued as before. There is a sense of being suspended in time as you walk through the rooms, trying to hear what the walls are speaking in their silent presence. In many sense, the rooms are so ordinary. That is part of what makes them so important.

In one of the last rooms, there was a plaque on the wall that contained a quote from Elie Wiesel: "How is it possible that so many knew so much and remained silent!"

In the silence of the rooms, those words seemed to offer what the walls and the memories contained within them were trying to say. You see, the words of Elie Wiesel can be read in two ways, two directions and each of these directions teaches us something about sanctuary and the role of sanctuary in creating a more just world.

In one direction, the words ask us how is it possible that so much death, suffering and injustice went on day after day in so many places to so many people, and the observers remained silent. How is it possible to witness the systematic death of so many and remain silent? Why did so many not speak out when such injustice was taking place?

In the other direction, the words ask us how is it possible that safety was provided to the Frank family in the midst of the workers at the Frank factory and no one spoke of it for so many months until someone could not remain silent any longer and betrayed them?

These two directions offer us two faces of what is needed to create sanctuary in our world today. And it is only when we are able to create that sanctuary that we will truly know peace. The central questions are: When are we called to remain silent? When are we called on to speak?

Throughout history, sanctuary was provided to anyone who sought justice from the Church. Coming into the church building, into the area around the altar, any person, by placing his or her hand on the altar could require that the Church investigate the situation that was being brought before them. And the person was held in safety until justice could be served.

The asking of sanctuary requires someone else to act, to investigate, to question, to search for the truth, to not simply accept what appeared to be happening and to look beyond the obvious.

To question is a difficult thing. Some regard questions as attacks on authority...while others regard questions as a disruption. Some simply see questioning as being impolite, or rude. Yet the creating of sanctuary requires that we question, not only alone but with others.

The creating of sanctuary requires that we learn to be open to questions, to hear them as part of the seeking of truth. The ability to question comes together with the ability to listen, to see, to learn to understand in a new way. It is in our questioning that together we are able to seek and find the truth.

Sometimes, the questions are simple. We do not need to have the answers before we ask the questions - questions as simple as: Who benefits? Who has the power? How did they get the power? Whose voices are we hearing? Who has been silenced? Who does not have enough power to be able to be heard? How can we learn to hear better?

The other type of sanctuary requires silence. For example, the sanctuary movement that provided safety and security for Central Americans hiding in the US required silence, the ability to not speak so as to provide safety for others.

It is curious that we use the same word, sanctuary, for both of these sets of actions even while we describe the central place where we come to pray together as a sanctuary, a place where we recognize the holy in the words that are spoken to teach us, in the persons who gather. Part of the task that is before us is to bring all these understandings of sanctuary together so that we can understand what we are supposed to be doing, how we are to do it and with whom.

There are some who would confuse sanctuary with safety or security. Those who imply that to question, to raise concerns, to understand what is truly happening and why puts us at risk. However the long tradition of sanctuary to which we belong calls us to recognize just the opposite. To not question puts us at risk. To not question threatens our safety. To surrender the right to know to any group of elite is to surrender the security of us all.

In addition, in our quest for sanctuary, we have to see ourselves as part of the whole of humanity. The work for sanctuary is something we must do with others. How can we possibly understand sanctuary if we do not seek peace that is intertwined with justice? Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, told us: "The more people you include, the closer you are to God."

If sanctuary is where we come to recognize the holy, the Presence of God in the presence of others, then we will have sanctuary, and the security and safety that so many seek, only when sanctuary is a reality for all people everywhere.

May we be sanctuary builders each day of our lives.