**Starting-Over Guidesheet #5**

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**Your Place of Sanctuary**

***Judith Couchman***

It’s hard to journey forward, to delve into a fresh start, when we’re dragging along guilt, regret, and unforgiveness. But if unfortunate circumstances or cagey people initiated our starting-over process, we’re probably harboring these feelings. These negative residuals are common, the natural fallout from someone or something pushing you out of the proverbial nest.

Still, if we don’t acknowledge and relinquish these emotional burdens, they’ll hinder us the rest of our lives. The weight can break us down, even destroy us. To start over with an inner freedom that propels us forward, we need to first understand what’s holding us back. This guidesheet can help you manage guilt, regret, and unforgiveness, replacing them with grace, forgiveness, and sanctuary.

Begin by reading the attached article, “Desperately Seeking Sanctuary.” (It’s really important to do this.) Then explore these questions, based on the article.

1. How would you define these words? Grace; forgiveness; sanctuary.
2. Did anything about the medieval laws of sanctuary surprise you? If so, what and why?
3. Did anything about these laws comfort or disturb you? Why?
4. What could your answers to questions 2 and 3 reveal about your attitudes regarding grace, forgiveness, and sanctuary?
5. What might you need to resolve about the attitudes you expressed in question 4?
6. What grace do you need in your life?
7. Whom do you need to forgive? How can you forgive them?
8. How do you need to forgive yourself? How can you do this?
9. How do you need sanctuary? Where can you find or create it?
10. Do you believe in God’s sanctuary, as described in the article?Why, or why not?
11. Do you want God’s sanctuary? If so, how can you grip his grace?
12. How could accepting God’s sanctuary change your life, your starting-over process?

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**Desperately Seeking Sanctuary**

***Judith Couchman***

The towering Durham Cathedral ranks as Europe’s most important Romanesque church. It’s a World Heritage Site and considered “the greatest Norman building in England, perhaps even in Europe.” Its size and architectural detail stagger the mind. Its cultural and spiritual histories loom large and legendary. But during the Middle Ages the beauty and grandeur probably didn’t faze an Anglo-Saxon in deep trouble. He just wanted to reach the church in time to save his life.

By English law, Durham Cathedral participated in the sanctuary tradition. When a criminal or debtor wanted to escape arrest, he could plead for asylum at the cathedral, if he arrived before pursuing authorities caught him. The runaway banged on the cathedral’s north door, using the enormous bronze sanctuary knocker shaped like the head of an ugly griffin and better suited for a Viking ship than a sacred entrance. Then the fugitive desperately clung to the knocker’s ring, waiting for someone to usher him in and toll the church bell to notify Durham’s citizens that a felon sought sanctuary. (At night, two men waited in a room above the north door, looking for sanctuary seekers arriving in the dark.) If anyone in the realm violated a person’s right to sanctuary, the church-at-large excommunicated him.

Once inside, the criminal confessed his crime to a priest, surrendered his weapons, paid a nominal fee, and donned a black gown. He lived in a railed-off alcove above the southwest tower, and within 37 days decided whether to stand trial or leave the country. If a criminal chose to “quit the kingdom,” the law afforded him nine days to exit England’s borders, traveling solely on the king’s highways. For the journey, he wore nothing on his head and a long white robe. He carried a wooden cross.

**The Medieval Right to Sanctuary**

England’s medieval sanctuary law, practiced by designated churches throughout the kingdom, actually formed its roots in pagan religious practices. In Egyptian, Greek, and Roman temples, the cella—the room that displayed a statue of the honored god—could protect criminals or refugees seeking sanctuary. Later, toward the end of the fourth century, the Roman government recognized Christian sanctuary laws for churches, adopting the ancient belief that sacred spaces were impenetrable and contagious. Someone “in sanctuary” had entered a holy place that could not be violated, and under its influence, he might spiritually transform.

This protection, though banned for a short period because of abuse, carried into the Middle Ages and countries beyond England. The earliest written documentation of English sanctuary appeared in the dooms or laws of the Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelberht, in 600 A.D. Later, the types of crimes allowed, the extent of protection, the ritual for obtaining sanctuary, and the punishment for violation varied according to locations and rulers. One law distinguished between accidental and premeditated murder. In some churches, the fugitive needed to sit on a firth or peace stool near the altar to gain sanctuary.

Norman kings legislated two kinds of sanctuary churches: a general sanctuary for all churches and a chartered sanctuary for selected churches. A charter granted immunity for life, even for those who committed high treason. Over time, a court poet, a pretender to the throne, and even royal family members rushed to sanctuary to avoid a king’s hostility. Not even a sovereign could yank his relatives out of a church. In some places, violating sanctuary led to capital punishment.

Whatever the details, the sanctuary principle remained the same: if you’ve committed a horrible crime, run to the church for protection. During this anxious journey, signs of the cross often pointed the way. Stone crosses inscribed with the word *Sancturarium* stood as sign-posts along the highways, leading sinners to their haven. In some locations, crosses also marked the boundaries of church land, and stepping within this area assured safety. Sometimes crosses themselves provided sanctuary. In 11th century Scotland, when certain clansmen who committed unintended murder touched the MacDuff Cross, they escaped punishment from outsiders (those not under the earl of Fife’s jurisdiction). For the sinner aware of his crime, the sign of the cross meant mercy.

Unfortunately, sanctuary laws could be abused. Experienced criminals committed offenses intentionally, risking night flights to cathedrals. To peaceful citizens and government authorities, it seemed unfair for lawbreakers to hide in churches. When priests released criminals to exit a country, some “penitents” dodged the king’s highway and escaped into the unknown. Through the centuries violations increased, with armed invaders storming cathedrals and capturing law breakers. In the 12th century, a sanctuary law didn’t deter the king’s henchmen from murdering Archbishop Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. By the Reformation, sanctuary rights fell out of favor, and the last laws disappeared in England and Europe by the 17th and 18th centuries.

**The Broad Door of Grace**

Medieval sanctuary laws forgave horrific crimes and blessed the repentant offenders with a clean start. It’s difficult for our post-modern mindset to condone this protection. We can understand political sanctuary from ruthless dictators, but offering asylum to criminals? Their presence taints a community, a country. Moral law breakers should be punished. We do not like such lavish compassion.

Thankfully, God does not think like us. His love for humanity flows deeper and wider than we can imagine (Rom. 8:39). So does his mercy (Eph. 2:4-5). Early medieval sanctuary laws can only faintly reflect the Sovereign’s endless patience. Whatever sin we commit, however many times we fail, he forgives us. God waits in the night of our souls, swinging open his broad door of grace when we flee to him and confess. He accepts us however we arrive: sweaty from the escape, wild-eyed with fear, the blood-stench of crime on our sleeves, and doubting that sanctuary from sin—our haunting spiritual crimes—actually exists.

Still, we can believe it. During the medieval sanctuary process, signs of the cross accompanied sinners in and out of asylum, stepping them toward an altered life. In turn, Christ’s cross bears the promise of forgiveness, helping us find refuge in God’s grace. Even more, God doesn’t banish us from his kingdom or force us to stand trial. When we slip back into life, spiritually we are totally free, utterly impeachable. Wearing robes of white, carrying the sign of the cross—the mark of the King’s forgiveness—we can begin again.

*—From The Mystery of the Cross by Judith Couchman*

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