

**A Sermon on God and Place<sup>1</sup>**  
**The Reverend John A. Runkle, RA**  
**The Collegiate Chapel of St. John at The DeKoven Center, Racine, WI**  
**June 18, 2023**

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*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight,  
O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

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It is indeed a privilege to preach here in historic St. John's Chapel on the campus of the DeKoven Center. This visit is my first and hopefully not my last at the place once known as the "Sewanee of the North." Being from Sewanee, I suspect that title was given by someone from down there, rather than the other way around, since Racine College was established before the University of the South. Even so, I have learned of several affectionate connections between the two places, such as, Bishop Charles Quintard, the second Bishop of the Diocese of TN and an ardent Sewanee supporter, he also served on the Racine Board of Trustees for a number of years and had high praise for Dr. James DeKoven.

Likewise, Bishop Frank Gailor, the third Bishop of TN, was a student here at Racine, where he received his BA and was class valedictorian before coming to the School of Theology in Sewanee and ultimately to the Episcopacy. And finally, the Sisters of St. Mary of the Western Province, the religious order of Episcopal nuns, who resided on this campus from the 1930's to the late 1980's, are related to the Sisters of St. Mary of the Southern Province, who still have a convent on Sewanee mountain. In fact, I recently learned from the sisters in Sewanee that two sisters made a pilgrimage here two weeks ago to visit the last living sister from the Racine convent, Sr. Mary Grace Rom, who is 103 years old and lives at St. John's on The Lake senior living community in Milwaukee. They also visited the cemetery in Kenosha where many sisters are buried, along with coming here to the DeKoven Center where the former convent's archives are housed. Examples of the six degrees of separation that commonly occur in the life of the Episcopal Church

All of this to say, we here today are on sacred ground and should have removed our shoes as a sign of respect, adoration and praise. That's because for more than 170 years, Anglicans have come to this area seeking an encounter with the living God, some before Wisconsin even was admitted as a state into the Union. In the 1840's and 50's, many still thought of this area as the frontier, the leading edge of the Great Northwest. I understand Dr. DeKoven, early in his tenure here, had to commute to Chicago by boat because train travel was yet to be built in this direction.

And this site, on which Racine College was built, is an incredibly dramatic setting – perched on the edge of a land mass facing east, looking out over a large body of water and an unlimited horizon, to greet the rising sun each day and look with hopeful expectation toward the second coming of our Lord. Historically, shorelines are geographic places where the forces of nature, earth wind and water, collide – sometimes peacefully and sometimes not. Places where we humans are mere spectators, awe-struck by the enormity and strength of these forces of creation. Some psychologists describe our reactions to such places as the diminutive effect – meaning places like this conjure up within us an instinctual desire for the transcendent because we are

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<sup>1</sup> A video recording of this sermon may be viewed at [hsec.us/da](https://hsec.us/da).

reminded that we are very small fish in a very large pond. But rather than feeling tiny and insignificant, we are encouraged and strengthened by witnessing these elemental forces and knowing a Higher Power is at work. Places such as this exude a timeless quality, a glimpse of eternity that elevates our consciousness above the concerns and occupations that can burden daily life. A very different experience than one might have in the midst of an urban environment.

So, the founders of Racine College capitalized on this dramatic setting by positioning their first buildings parallel to the shoreline and facing east. Park Hall and Kemper Hall formed the bookends of what would become a grand linear structure facing and reflecting the grandeur of God's creation laid out before it. After the arrival of Dr. DeKoven in 1859, this chapel was built in 1864, positioned slightly to the west but still oriented to the east in traditional liturgical fashion and centered between Park and Kemper Halls. Even as the connecting buildings between Park and Kemper Halls were built in the early 1870's, an open portal was created through those buildings so the Chapel still could maintain its visual connection with the shoreline and lake beyond.

These buildings were built in the architectural style of Gothic Revival, a movement that originated in England in the early 1800's and was still in its infancy in this country as these buildings were designed and constructed. In the minds of many, Gothic Revival evokes the spirit of the Medieval church and was the only appropriate style to accommodate Anglican worship as the influence of the Oxford Movement and Tractarianism gained popularity in this country.

The design of this chapel is derived from English Gothic parish churches, such as St. Michael's, Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire, built in c. 1230, the design of which also influenced the design of St. James the Less in Philadelphia, built in 1846, and Chapel of the Cross in Madison County, Mississippi, built in 1852, both of which are notable historic buildings. However, this chapel differs from its two sister churches because of its collegiate seating arrangement – stalls inwardly facing each other across the center aisle rather than pews all facing east toward the altar. This configuration is historically conducive to the daily office and appropriate for a college worshiping community. Rather than staring at the back of people's heads seated in front of us, we are able to see the faces of our community gathered together for worship. What's more, this configuration is more responsive to liturgical processions since that ritual returned to prominence in response to the Oxford Movement.

But, there's more to the holiness of this place than just facts and figures. Good architecture invites us into the mystery that undergirds its intended purpose.

Henry Adams, in his classic book *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, describes a church door and threshold as the *pons seclorum*, the bridge of ages, that connects us and our ancestors, known and unknown, in that transcendent cloud of witnesses. So that in crossing the threshold, we enter an ethereal, spiritual space, not as a collection of individuals, but a community of souls.

Esther de Waal, in her book *To Pause at the Threshold*, describes something equivalent. She writes:

“This is very similar to the traditional monastic practice of *statio*, which also pays homage to the threshold moment, and shows reverence for the handling of space and time. The monk or nun enters the church for the saying of the daily offices, but always leaves him- or herself time to stand, to wait, to let go of all the demands of whatever the previous activity had been, with all its concurrent anxieties and expectations. That stillness permits each one to enter into that space kept empty in the heart for the Word of God. By rushing whether through a sense of duty or obligation, or to save a few extra moments for the task at hand, they may gain something in terms of daily work. What is lost, however, is the attention, the awareness of crossing over into the time and place for *opus Dei*, the work of God.”

Michael Mayne, former Dean of Westminster Abbey, once wrote in his book *Pray, Love, Remember*, “What is this space for? It is where we human beings, in all our marvelous diversity, may sometimes engage with the transcendent; for the space we have inherited is not just any old space, but a holy space, the place where past generations have met in search of that encounter between the seen and the unseen.”

And then, there’s the poet Philip Larkin, who wrote “Church Going.” Larkin, a non-Christian begins the poem with a somewhat dismissive tone about the role of churches, but concludes with this last stanza that celebrates its eternal value:

“A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground...”

Yes, there is something intrinsically important about church buildings because they meet a felt need that we have, and when we find that we have “a hunger in [ourselves] to be more serious,” churches are the places to which we gravitate. My mind goes back to September 11th, 2001, when churches and other places of worship were filled with people hungry for comfort, hope and strength.

Now, some of us may resonate with the theology this chapel has to offer and some may not. That’s fine either way. We all have different sensibilities and there are other places and instances that offer us the spiritual sustenance we seek.

Yet, in the end, sacred space is not so much about space where something is done, it’s about space where someone is encountered. And this someone is the Ultimate Reality we call God.