

THE MODERN CATHEDRAL

rootedness *belonging* *truth*

by Reverend Dr. Les Fairfield

I remember an aerial photograph of Cologne in Germany, taken in the summer of 1945 after Allied bombing raids had flattened the city. Most of what we see in the picture is simply rubble: flat, hopeless and depressing. But in the middle of the photo stands Cologne Cathedral, deliberately left standing by the Allied bombers. The cathedral is stark, almost grotesque amidst the ruins, and seems strikingly symbolic of something. Defiance? Endurance? It certainly stands out and grabs one's attention.

Cathedrals are a bit like that today amidst Protestant America. Please don't hear me equating all American Protestant churches with rubble! Instead, I'm proposing that Protestant Christianity in this country is profoundly individualistic and the cathedral doesn't fit into that picture. I want to put forth for consideration the case that cathedrals in America – Anglican and Roman – embody three crucial values that most American Protestant communities are missing.

HISTORY

At the most obvious and superficial level, cathedrals represent history. When – or perhaps if – most Americans think of cathedrals, most likely the picture that comes to mind is a big, strange-looking stone building that is very old. Even if they have seen cathedrals only in movies, like the *Harry Potter* scenes in Gloucester Cathedral, people associate cathedrals with history. Except maybe on the Fourth of July, most Americans don't spend much time thinking

about history. Everything in the Information Age shrieks against the past. Late-modern capitalism loves "creative destruction": Tear it down and build something new, and temporary. The news cycle keeps repeating, "Now this!" When my children were teenagers, the ultimate put-down was "That's so five minutes ago!" Our culture is amnesiac.

The problem with forgetting our history is that it makes us rootless, and often clueless. We're apt to be blown about by "every wind of doctrine," every "NEW!" fad that (briefly) catches our attention on social media. One recent study found that the average American adult has an attention span of eight seconds. That's just below goldfish, at nine. So we forget things. We forget – for example – that war kills people. That's partly the human condition, to forget. And then to pay in blood for our forgetfulness. Young soldiers in the French Army in 1913 had never experienced warfare. One of them cried, "Give me combat!" Then the Guns of August roared and killed the entire class of 1914 from St. Cyr, the French national military academy. I think of this when I hear people call for violence in America today. "The country is rotten to the core!" they scream. "It can't be fixed!" If only we would remember that our last Civil War killed three quarters of a million soldiers...

At the very least, the cathedral stands for memory. Like Cologne Cathedral in 1945, it stands – alone, if necessary – and cries, "Remember your past! Consider your history! Learn from your roots!"

COMMUNITY

The Cathedral also stands for community. I don't mean just the local community: the school district, the Chamber of Commerce, or the volunteer fire department (although Robert Putnam's books, like *Bowling Alone*, remind us that even these are withering from our failure to participate). I'm thinking more of the wide-area community that facilitates belonging with people one wouldn't normally see every day.

Aggressive individualism is hard-wired in the DNA of most Americans (to mix several metaphors). The default setting of most Americans was and is individualism--"I am the basic building block of reality"--and Protestant churches have failed to overcome this pathology entirely. For most of Protestant Christians in America, "the Church" means the local congregation -- at most, because I can move to another church in a heartbeat if the one I (temporarily) attend doesn't "meet my needs." The absolutely sovereign "I" has a right to happiness, and that may mean migrating to louder music and better entertainment.

Contrarily, an Anglican cathedral reminds us of a stubborn reality beyond the "I" and the local congregation. It stands out like Cologne Cathedral amidst the rubble of Individualism. It says, "you belong to something bigger than yourself. Even bigger than your local mega-church. You belong to a community that you seldom if ever see. You belong to a family filled with people who aren't like you. You are not alone."

When I was a little boy, I sang in the children's choir at Grace Church in Amherst, MA in the diocese of Western Massachusetts. Once a year, all the junior choirs in the diocese gathered at Christ Church Cathedral in Springfield. We all dressed up in our cassocks and cottas, lined up by parishes outside the cathedral, and processed in. The biggest boy in each choir got to carry the parish banner. It was like a football crowd at Amherst College. It reminded me that I belonged to something really big, and loud. I loved it.

Cathedrals can bring big crowds together if we work at it. I served in the Anglican Diocese of New England after I retired from Trinity School for Ministry. Diocesan Synod at the pro-Cathedral in Amesbury, MA meant that we got to see people from the half-dozen East African congregations from our diocese in the crowd. We all saw that we belonged to people with relatives in Nairobi and Kampala and Dar Es Salaam. Though Anglicans might be sparse on the ground in spiritually stony New England, it was a hopeful reminder that we are part of a big family with brothers and sisters all over the world.

AUTHORITY

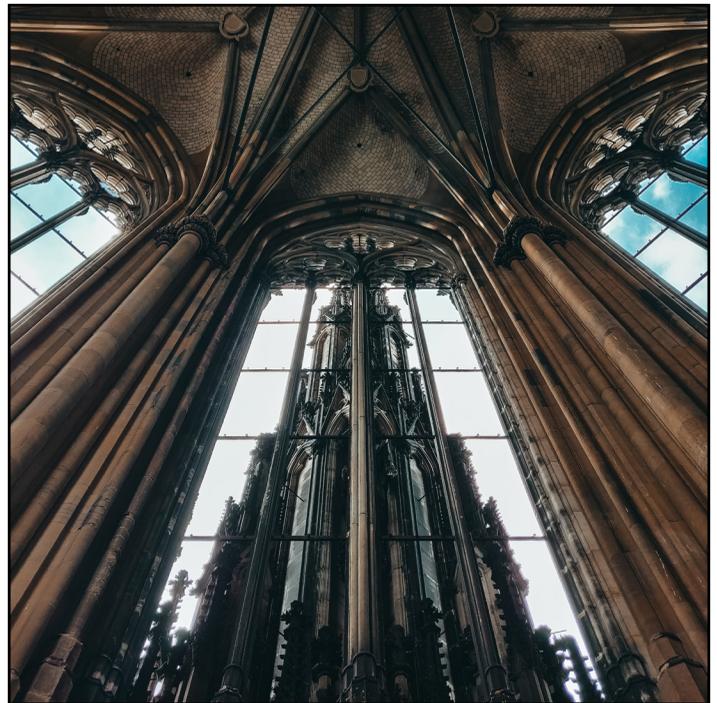
If history and community are out of fashion in America today, the third meaning of the cathedral is even more unpopular. That's authority -- and specifically authority outside of the self. I'm reminded of a scene from the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*, when the frontiersman Nathaniel Poe was listening to a British Army recruiter. "I appeal to you," the sergeant cried, "as loyal subjects of His Majesty, the King of England!" Poe muttered, "I don't consider myself subject to much."

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy famously claimed (in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 1992) that at "the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." That's New Age bloviation, not the Christian Story, which tells of one God of the Universe who revealed truth to the world through Jesus of Nazareth. Every individual has the freedom (thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit) to affirm that story--or indeed to deny it, at our peril--but not to invent it.

Early on in Christian History--within three generations of Jesus' resurrection--communities of Christians in the Roman world found it useful and proper to elect a bishop in each city. Bishop Ignatius of Antioch argued powerfully around 110 AD that the bishop was charged to uphold and maintain the authentic Christian Story. In the swirling chaos of competing religions at the time, this principle of authority was crucial in preserving the faith once committed to the saints. Eventually, Christians were able to build churches instead of meeting in private homes. In the 300s AD, the bishop got a big church with a *cathedra* where he sat and taught his flock. The *cathedra* symbolized his authority to teach, keeping his flock headed in the same direction, and amazingly, it tended to work.

We must acknowledge unequivocally that there have been bad bishops. Sexually abusive bishops. Bishops who have made a career of tearing down the Christian Faith they had sworn to uphold. Bishops in the apostolic succession of Judas. But let's not permit the abuse of the bishop's office to undercut its proper use.

In conclusion, though ingrained individualism rebels at the idea, authoritative teaching is still needed in the Anglican Church today, as are history and community. The *cathedra* can serve as a powerful reminder of these needed things, but also has the opportunity to actually be the place to find and receive these gifts of rootedness, belonging, and truth.



THE REV. DR. LES FAIRFIELD IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF CHURCH HISTORY at Trinity School for Ministry in Amherst, PA. He has led thirty study tours in the British Isles and elsewhere, visiting familiar cathedrals like Canterbury and less well-known ruins like the one at Speitla in Tunisia.