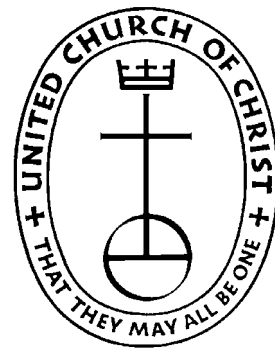


# Searching for Prayer Rooms in Airports

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
June 6, 2010



All of life is connected by a sacred thread and that every thought and action can be a prayer. We don't need to limit our expression of reverence and gratitude only to settings surrounded by stained glass and mahogany. We must remember that the heart of our religious life takes place in the way we live our lives day-in day-out.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
June 6, 2010 (#1403)  
Reading: Exodus 24:15-16; 25:1,8

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

## Searching for Prayer Rooms in Airports

The confirmation course we use here to prepare our young people for adult membership in the church is not one out of a standard UCC book. Instead, Libby and I designed our own course so that it matches the theology and practices of this congregation. Part of that course focuses on learning from other religions, and we show a video series about teenagers in other religions.

One video is about two Hindu teens at India's annual Ganesh festival. It shows that Hindu worship is primarily in the home. In the film the father leads a home service, a young priest comes to the family home to lead another, and young teen girls also lead a home service.

The video about Judaism focuses on two Orthodox Jewish boys in Jerusalem preparing for their bar mitzvahs. Again, we see a family worshipping at home. We also see a father and son returning from Saturday's Shabbat service and then spending the afternoon at home studying the Torah together.

In reference to Judaism, my good friend and college classmate Rabbi Haim Beliak invited some friends over for a Shabbat meal one Friday night. As we gathered around the table, Haim's wife Lynn led the prayers and liturgy welcoming the arrival of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is welcomed at home before people go to the synagogue.

In the confirmation film about Islam, teenager Sharif Mansour's family returns to the father's original village for the festival of Eid-ul-Adha. And again there is imagery of the family at worship in a home, of the father reading the Qur'an.

The film about Buddhism looks at the life of a young Thai monk, so there is no family setting. We see the monk fasting each day from noon until the next morning, going onto the streets to collect alms, studying and meditating. Now when Thanan, the young monk, had some free time, what did he and his best friend do? They walked into the forest near the monastery in order to meditate some more. Their free time was devoted to a spiritual practice.

Spirituality, religious learning and outreach are not confined to temples, synagogues, mosques, churches or monasteries – nor are they confined to one particular day a week. Rather, they can and should be located in the heart of daily life. Christianity, of

all the world's major religions, probably has the most difficulty with that notion. We depend on religious professionals to do all of our religion for us and to do so in specially designated buildings.

In the Book of Exodus, we read about Moses liberating the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt and then leading them on a difficult journey toward a new life in Canaan. Today's text tells about a time when the people were especially rebellious.

*Moses went up the mountain to where the clouds engulfed it. The glory of Our God then came to dwell on Mount Sinai. The cloud covered the mountain for six days; on the seventh, God called to Moses out of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of Our God looked like an all-consuming fire at the top of the mountain. Moses climbed the mountain until he disappeared into the cloud and stayed there for 40 days and 40 nights.*

*Then our God said to Moses: "Tell the Israelites to collect offerings for me from all who are moved in their hearts to give. And tell them to construct a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among you."*

That passage is sometimes translated, "Tell them to construct a sanctuary so that I may dwell within it." But that is not what the Hebrew says – it is, "so that I may dwell among you." God isn't primarily found in our sanctuaries, but rather in our interactions with other people, wherever those interactions occur. Our religious life does not require leadership by religious professionals or settings like this one.

Recently in the *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*, writer Shahnaz Habib reflected on what it means to be a traveler. Let me share some of her words with you. She said:

*I hunt down prayer rooms in airports. It began a few years ago at Kennedy Airport in New York. After seeing a friend off and feeling at loose ends, I tracked down the airport's prayer spaces – a synagogue, a church, a mosque, and an interfaith space, wall-to-wall next to each other in Terminal Four.*

*I sat down in the mosque; it was empty. I had not prayed in years. I looked at the calligraphy on the walls, the stack of Qur'ans next to the window, and the wooden screen behind which women were supposed to pray – strangely familiar from the mosques of my childhood, but so far away in time and place. Perhaps I had forgotten how to pray. What would I say, and in what language? Then I thought of my friend flying off to start a new life in a city she barely knew, and prayer arrived on my tongue.*

*As I prayed that day for homes, journeys and friendships across distances, airplanes took off and landed on runways nearby. The buzz of flight announcements rose with my words. How could I have not known that, at any given moment, so many people*

*were traveling? That the world was crisscrossed by these journeys, creating an invisible global map of movement?*

*Somehow, that day in the JFK airport mosque, surrounded by thousands of journeys, a brief glimmer of faith arrived. They also travel who sit and wait.*

She went on:

*Since then I have kept an eye out for travelers' prayer spaces. In most airports it is a silent, empty room tucked away in a corner. To me, this bareness that can contain multitudes and mirror yourself back to you is a marvelous metaphor for the core of all sacredness. The air in these spaces is suffused with the hopes, fears, wonder and uncertainty that anonymous travelers have invested in them. Usually I am alone in these rooms. But occasionally there is someone else. I have heard sobbing; I have seen a hand reaching tentatively for another hand. And I have taken each memory to the next airport prayer room I have found myself in.*

Ms. Habib continued:

*Now here I am in an airport again. This time the airport is Gandhi International in New Delhi. Once again I am here to see off a friend.*

*I arrive early, she is not here yet, so I wander around the airport searching for a prayer room. Surely in a land of gods and goddesses too many to count, an airport will make space for travelers to pray.*

*But the airport belongs to India Inc., the India of trade talks and nuclear deals and call centers. It buzzes with ambition and energy. No prayer rooms as far as I can see. I walk around the airport aimlessly.*

Then Shahnaz Habib sat in one of the waiting areas. A stylishly dressed modern young woman sat nearby with an older man who appeared to be her father. Ms. Habib watched them, thinking of her own father. Eventually they got up and it was the father, not the daughter, who was traveling.

At the security entrance, in traditional Indian fashion, the daughter bent down and touched her father's feet with her hands. She brought her palm to her eyes. And his hands were on her head. As she rose they hugged each other tightly.

Ms. Habib wrote:

*The pain I feel at this moment is unbearable, so sweet that it sickens, so bitter that*

*I want to throw up. I miss my parents in ways and in volumes that words cannot talk of. The wordless goodbye, the ancient ritual of hands to feet to eyes made new by the charge of intense emotion, the unpredictability of who will leave first – every journey I have made, every goodbye I have said seems to be wrapped up in those moments. It is such pain that it makes me long for God, for a Later where loved ones are reunited, for a world without distances, for order and meaning.*

Now after the father had entered the security area and his daughter departed, Ms. Habib noticed that a middle-aged woman in an old-fashioned blue crepe sari sitting next to her, was looking at her with curiosity. The woman looked tired and grumpy.

Ms Habib said:

*At first I feel annoyed by her relentless staring, but I know she means no harm. There is a fine line between prying and concern and it's easy, especially in India, to mistake the second for the first. I give her a tentative smile and her face breaks open into a wide smile that transforms a plain face into a sweet one. She lifts her legs off the floor and crosses them under her on the seat and turns toward me. "Where are you going?"*

And thus they began a conversation about the friend for whom Ms. Habib was waiting and the journey on which the woman next to her was beginning. After a half hour of stories and anecdotes, the woman prepared to board her plane and Ms. Habib decided it was time to renew her search for a prayer room.

She wrote:

*"Do you know if there is a prayer room here?" I ask the security guard at the entrance to the check-in area. The tight lines of his face, drawn into an intimidating mask, slip for a second into surprise and then amusement as he shakes his head. He keeps a wary eye on me as I wander around asking others.*

*The coffee vendor does not know and neither does the woman who cleans the rest-rooms. She does offer that there is a changing room for "ladies with babies."*

*Then, at the Air India counter, the official on duty peers into my face through the cubbyhole in the glass screen between us and gestures behind me. I turn around and look. Behind me, nothing but the teeming airport. A man with a cell phone in one hand and coffee in the other is running toward the X-ray machine. A tall blonde tourist is leafing through a travel magazine. An old couple with grandchildren in tow are pondering what to buy at the snacks stall. I don't see any signs for the prayer room.*

*"Where?" I ask again, and he smiles mischievously. "Everywhere. Anywhere.*

*You can pray wherever you want. No one will stop you."*

She went on:

*I accept defeat and make my way to the least crowded seats in the airport lobby. Then it strikes me. I CAN pray anywhere. Wherever I choose to pray is the temple. This is what it means to be a traveler – every inch of earth is sacred. The X-ray machine, the trolleys, the black-and-white flowers on the dupatta of the woman who is emerging from the restrooms, the smiling couple on the cover of a magazine, the pen with which I am writing this thought, and the thought that I am thinking.*

*They are all connected by a sacred thread. Every thought is a prayer.*

*A mother emerging from the room for "ladies with babies" scolds her child, "Open your mouth and let me see what's in it." The little girl opens her mouth and it is the universe that spills out. Her baby talk is the unsung choral song of galaxies and orbits and worms and early birds and red miniskirts.*

Now that's the end of Shahnah Habib's story of travel and prayer.

In *The Life of Pi*, novelist Yann Martel's central character is Pi Patel, a Hindu teen who wants to be Christian and Muslim as well as Hindu. Here's what Pi says about his Muslim prayer rug: "I loved my prayer rug. Ordinary in quality though it was, it glowed with beauty in my eyes. I am sorry I lost it. Wherever I laid it I felt special affection for the patch of ground beneath it and the immediate surroundings, which to me is a clear indication that it was a good prayer rug because it helped me remember that the earth is the creation of God and sacred the same all over."

Do you remember the story of Moses being called by God to return to Egypt, the story of the burning bush and Moses being told by God to take off his shoes because the ground beneath him was holy? Well, all the ground beneath each of us is holy.

I think those of us in Christianity need to remember that all of life is connected by a sacred thread and that every thought and action can be a prayer. We don't need a minister or priest to pray for us when we're sick; we can do that ourselves. We don't need to limit our expression of reverence and gratitude only to settings surrounded by stained glass and mahogany.

I think we must remember that the heart of our religious life takes place in the way we live our lives day-in day-out. We are called to follow Jesus:

- In our homes where our faith should be expressed and it should guide our

interactions with our family and friends.

- In our workplaces and classrooms where our faith should provide nurture for our relationships with colleagues and ethical guidance for the decisions we make.
- And in our communities where our faith should put us at the side of the outcasts and on the streets marching for peace and justice.

The true prayer rooms are all about us – we just have to find them and then figure out what it means to follow the teachings and example of Jesus as we enter them. Amen.