

Why can't we just get another cross?

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When I walk into a space, I automatically imagine how it can be more aesthetically pleasing. As a pastor, my brain often kicked into action: *Asbestos tiles and white carpet? We might as well put a sign up that says, "No children allowed." We could surely replace these yellow fiberglass windows with stained glass. We need to paint this wall.*

When I actually verbalized bits of my internal dialogue, I was always surprised to hear a robust defense. There seemed to be something more going on than just the inability to change the decor. It took me a while to understand the layers of meaning that each item held. And it took me a long time to realize what was happening in the minds of the defenders.

There are certain tools that are used in warfare in order to prove victory and assert dominance over the captor. We see it in the Hebrew Bible, as the systematic destruction of a people meant the violent and forced defeat of the military, overtaking of land, dispersion of intellectuals, exile of the political leaders, displacement of the artisans, rape of women, enslavement of people, and the ***desecration of the sacred.***

The defilement of what was holy happened in many ways: sometimes it was taking an item that was revered down and replacing it with a symbol from another religion. Other times it was destroying or displacing the item. Still other times, it was a crude debasement that had to do with an unclean ritual, defecation, sexual act or some other nastiness that the human mind seems to dredge up in times of war.

Even as a Reformed minister, who is a product of the regrettable history of iconoclasm and who warns that our minds can be "factories of idols," I know every worshiping community has sacred items. The material object becomes imbued with holiness because the beauty of the artwork, the memory of the donor, or the significance of its history.

We are hard-wired as humans to protect these objects. It may be as evolutionary as protecting our children. We have a gut reaction to see the removal of something sacred as an act of war. Ask any pastor. Many of us have asked about a cross or a seemingly unimportant object in the sanctuary, and ended up with a massive crisis on our hand as women and men go into full defense mode.

I often work in a liminal space with denominational churches--I try to point out different metaphors, sociological patterns, and economic trends to help people understand why their congregation may not be reaching out in a new generation in the same ways that they have in the past. It occurs to me that in this time, a lot of desecration is happening.

Sacred symbols that have meant so much in past generations (like the American flag in the sanctuary or the Warner Sallman Head of Christ in the fellowship hall) can be offensive in a new generation. But we also need to understand the damage that ripping away the sacred also causes. People also have that gut-reaction to protect their holy objects.

Denominations are dealing with shifting demographic patterns, and they are often left with rural congregations that no longer have the population base to sustain a building. Those buildings become dismantled—and when that happens, we often find out that the bricks and mortar were not just sacred for the people who worshiped there, but the entire community cries out in horror that the holy space that once stood in their downtown is gone.

Much of this sacred loss needs to happen and some of it is inevitable. But as we work with generational shifts and denominational downsizing, we can also be aware not to trample thoughtlessly on sacred items, but understand the depth of emotion that may be at stake.