

Sacred and profane

By [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

August 18, 2016

*To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Palmer's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and online-only content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

I was in Boston for a day, and my friend asked if there were any local sights I wanted to see. I tentatively suggested the Liberty Bell. "That's in Philadelphia," my friend laughed. "But I know where I'll take you. You're going to love this place." We got on the interstate and drove to a shopping mall. We entered next to a seafood restaurant, took the elevator down to the basement, and walked down a hallway. I heard chanting and prayers. Vested priests were lined up in a procession.

We were at the doors of a Carmelite chapel. The 4:00 mass was about to begin, and the pews were packed.

A chapel in a shopping mall is counterintuitive, but as I worshipped that day I marveled at the ease with which sacred and secular mixed in that holy space. The church was adorned with statues of Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Jude, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The sermon was lively, the cantor's voice was like honey, and more than 300 people received the Eucharist.

At the same time, people were in and out--shoppers with their bags, some of them talking loudly in the hallway and others coming in to worship. The gift store next to the chapel, where I bought my daughters orange and yellow cross-shaped suckers, reminded me that we were, indeed, inside a mall--at the crossroads of commerce, where the swipe of a credit card could secure tangible souvenirs made of corn syrup and wrapped in plastic.

It's easy to read Sunday's Gospel reading and focus on the healing, or on Jesus' clever undoing of his opponents. Those aspects are important, but at the heart of the story is a question that haunts our 21st-century lives: where is the line between the sacred and the secular?

In other encounters with religious leaders regarding his actions on the sabbath, Jesus responds in a variety of ways. Most famous, perhaps, are his words in Mark 2:27: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." This claim, abstract as it is, allows for the strict distinction between holy and profane to blur in the face of human need.

In this week's reading, however, Jesus is far blunter. He doesn't take the time to state a general principle about the relationship between sacred and secular. He simply points out concrete ways in which the line between the holy and the profane has already dissolved--by the compassionate act of leading a donkey to water, or by the unsolicited healing of a long-afflicted woman.

Might that line also be dissolved by a church in a shopping mall? By political activism that reflects God's desires for the life and wholeness of all people, by the denouncing of evil in our own daily practices, by the sacrifices a soldier makes for the sake of a larger peace, by congregations collaborating with their local communities around issues of justice, or by a testimony of faith spoken to a stranger on an airplane? Perhaps even by a kindergartener sucking on an orange sugary cross at the end of a stick, melding the delicious, syrupy flavor with what she has heard of God's beautiful, stunning grace.