

A Place called Home

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Home – we have been quite familiar with it these past few months. Remember the days when you longed just to be at home -- and now, we ask when can we leave it? Jesus uses home for us to understand God better. Home is a place where we belong with God. A reading from John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Four years ago, my husband Gregg and I embarked on a grand experiment. After twenty-one years, in a place we called home, we decided to sell our house, downsize our things pack up a U-Haul trailer and head 375 miles north and west and make our home in a place where we never lived before.

Our original plan after Gregg retired was for me to be a transitional pastor in different parts of our country or maybe even the world. We would move around every few years. When our friends in Illinois heard about this idea, they either caught our vision or thought we were crazy. As we started to pull up the anchors of our life, where we raised our children and where Gregg had his counseling practice, we began to understand how deep ties are that keep us in place. Now having moved twice in those four years, the idea of moving every few years does not sound as enticing as it did before! We couldn't ask for a better transition, where we reconnected with family and friends and made new ones as well. This is now home.

Our moves were quite conventional and we had places to which we were moving. It does give me pause when I think about the thousands who do not have safe places to lay their head at night. The homeless have lost any semblance of shelter or place to call their own. How dangerous and hopeless things must be for those who risk everything and leaving all the familiar behind because staying where they are is not an option. As the governor told us to stay home, which may be inconvenient for us, what about those with no home in which to stay? There are those where home is not a safe place in which to dwell.

Every refugee, every asylum seeker, every homeless person, every person in an abusive situation has a story to tell. Their stories are unique, personal and troubling. Everyone who does not have a home to call their own has a story of disappointment, collapsed dreams and fear.

The scripture today speaks to the power of home. It points to the power of having a home to which we belong and call our own. Home, the place where we return.

Jesus knows the importance of a dwelling place, a place where we can stay. Of any group of people, the people of Israel know what it means to have their home taken away. For centuries, the people of Israel have known fragility of home and how temporary it can be. Being a people who repeatedly have been conquered, their places of dwelling have been continually vulnerable. In the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, the philosopher/milkman Tevye and his family have to leave their home in Russia because they are Jews and are being expelled. He puts all that is dear to him in his milk cart and leaves with his wife and two youngest daughters. As he does, he shrugs, saying, "Maybe this is why we should always wear our hats!"

Jesus describes God as a possessor of many dwellings and the good news is that there is a place for us. A place to call home. Such words sound assuring to a people who are not sure where they will be dwelling from one generation to the next. "In my father's home. There are many dwelling places." There is enough room for all.

Jesus is offering his followers a place where they belong. He is offering them a permanent place, not a temporary one at the whim of the next conqueror. He is offering a place, which is reserved just for them. They have the assurance that the register is accurate; there will be no bureaucratic slip-ups; all the paperwork is in order. There will be a place, a home prepared just for them. It will have their name on it.

What comforting words. A place, a spot just for us and we need not worry about how we get there. Jesus himself will take us to a place called home.

There is a problem. His disciples are not ready to hear it. Thomas and Philip are caught up in the logistics. They cannot see beyond the impediments in their way. "Give us the address. How will we when know when we get there?"

All prerequisites that his followers had, got in the way of hearing about the wonderful promise that Jesus had just given them. He offered them a home, a place to belong where no military power, no political ideology, no whim of a dictator can take it away. The way to get there is by following Christ and following Christ's actions.

God shows us time and again that God is there for the ones without roots in the soil, the refugee, the migrant, the ones who seek a land and a place of their own. From Abraham who stated, "My father was a wandering Aramean," to Mary and Joseph, who had to seek asylum in Egypt when King Herod issued a death sentence on all babies under two. God provides.

Home is not always a piece of real estate. Home is the connection that grounds us and assures us that we belong. It is a place to turn to when the world stops making sense to us. Christ promises his followers and in turn promises us that he will lead us to God's home.

In the meantime, that place of home is in our community of faith, our church. In these past two months, we've come to know that our church home is not just a piece of real estate, but the connections we make with each other and that we are missing so dearly. We continue to create a dwelling that crosses the barriers of land and space and even time. In this period of our lives, home gets stretched to zoom calls and facetime. Home is hearing a voice that loves us and accepts us over telephone lines. Each time we reach out in empathy and understanding to those who are not like us, we build a web of connections that upholds and strengthens us and eases our troubled hearts. In this less than perfect world, we create a space where we are known and we can be known. As we do that, we look toward the time that we can be united, not only here in this space but in God's dwelling place.

The groaning of the world through displaced persons and pandemics and bickering grows louder. It shows how many have lost their way as they put convenience over health of others. Out of fear of their own losses, they are willing to sacrifice the vulnerable and the marginalized. Many have lost what

it means to belong and be connected through God's eyes. When we do lose that way, we find it difficult to find our way home to the place where Christ has gone to get it ready for us. God helps us along the way to that home we seek and connect with each other. We share our strength and our frailties, bolstering each other with care and faith. In that process, we find a home here on earth called church.

Writer, Anne Lamott, travelled down to the depths in bad life choices of addiction and depression. Her grandfather was a Presbyterian missionary. Her father rebelled, so she grew up in home that was anti-church. She writes in her book, *Travelling Mercies*, of wandering around near her home outside the bay area. Finding the open doors of a rundown little Presbyterian church, she heard singing. She tentatively walked up to the door and peeked in. After many fits and starts, she finally entered the church. She writes, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people of St Andrew tied a knot in it for me to help me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home, that its where when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'"

What we have to offer here and through cyberspace is life-giving and life-saving. It is not our preferred way to do things, but it is a path that continues to connect us.

We live in troubled and complicated times. We know our lives are far more stable and secure than many other fellow human beings in our world. Our message is from Jesus, himself, who says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Do not only trust in what I say, trust in what I do.

I offer a challenge this week for each of us to contact at least three different people by calling or emailing or writing a note that is from the church. Do this with people you do not know very well but to whom you are connected through Oak Grove church. Say you are calling because you miss seeing them and because we are together through this community of faith.

“How do you find the courage to simply pull up and leave everything and start all over again?” That is what a friend, whom I had known since our daughters were in Daisy Girl Scouts together, asked me before we pulled up our roots to move to Minnesota. I thought about it a moment and carefully replied, “It won’t be easy, but I do know that in each new place we will go, there will be a church, and in that church will be a group of people seeking to find a better way. That will be the place where we will be rooted and then go from there.” How well it becomes home to us is up to the church and to us to help make it in the image of God’s home. We have this gift, a gathering of Christians who believe there is a place for us that Jesus himself will prepare. How we express it in this place is now up to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.