

Where, and what, is home?

The topic of today's gospel – or, at least, one of them – is “home.” But what is home? When you think about home, what comes to mind? Is it simply a *building*, made with wood and plaster, or brick and mortar? Or do you think of it as a *shelter* from the storm, a place of refuge? Some people, when they hear the word “home,” they're thinking about the *hopes and dreams* of those who inhabit a home. Some think of it as a place where people *build and share a life together*. Perhaps when you hear the word “home” you think of a place of solace and comfort. A place where you feel safe and whole.

In our parish book club we just finished reading the book *Three Cups of Tea*, in which the author, Greg Mortenson, talks about how he developed a mission to build schools in the poorest parts of Pakistan. In one chapter, he describes his core group of supporters:

Mouzafer and the Korphe men were Shiite Muslims, along with ... Ghulam Parvi, and Makhmal the mason. Apo Razak, a refugee from Indian-occupied Kashmir, was a Sunni, as was Suleman. And the fiercely dignified bodyguard Faisal Baig belonged to the Ismaeli sect. “We all sat there laughing and sipping tea peacefully,” Mortenson says. “An infidel and representatives from three warring sects of Islam. And I thought if we can get along this well, we can accomplish anything. (Pages 188-189)

It would be hard, I think, to describe a more disparate group of people. And yet I think that Mortenson would feel that, when he was with those men, he was at home away from home.

Some have said that home is where the heart is. Others say home is where you hang your hat. Robert Frost once wrote that, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” No matter how you define it, the idea of “home” has a special place in the human heart. And it seems as though we are all seeking, and, when we find it, cherishing, a place to call home; a place where we “feel at home.” A very long time ago, St. Augustine gave expression to this longing, when he wrote, of God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Somehow our restless hearts are always looking for a place to rest, a place to find peace, and a place to call home.

As it turns out, our gospel reading is one of several that is recommended for use in Episcopal funerals. It is recommended, I think, because it is a statement of Jesus' promise to us, in the light of one of the most pronounced of human fears; the fear of separation. When we are separated from familiar surroundings, or from cherished relationships, we suffer. Well, this reading, that we've just heard, comes from a section of John's gospel called the “Farewell Address” of Jesus. In it, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them. But, he assures them, even though their relationship is going to change, it will not

end. Even though he will no longer be with them in the flesh, they will still remain connected. Jesus is going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house, where they will remain united to him forever. And the truth that Jesus is revealing is the fact that our home is always with God. And Jesus, who came from the very heart of God, is preparing a place for his disciples in God's home, in God's heart. Thus, the home we seek and long for, is not a place, but a relationship; a relationship within the heart of God, made possible by God. It's as if God were answering Augustine's meditation: Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.

Here's the good news: Even though the full realization of this relationship won't be experienced for some time, we can have a taste of the reality of it right now. When we do the works that Christ commands us to do, when we love one another as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, then God's love will dwell in us, and God is making a home in us. When the brokenhearted are comforted, God is making a home with us. When people lay down their lives for one another, God is making a home with us. When all of God's children are invited to gather around God's table, then God is making a home with us.

In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes about why she stays so close to her church. She says, "I think we missed church ten times in twelve years. Sam (her son) would be snuggled in people's arms in the earlier shots, [and] shyly trying to wriggle free of hugs in the later ones." She tells of their pastor Veronica who sings to them from the pulpit and who tells them stories of when she was a child. In one story she tells about a time when she was 7 years old and her best friend got lost. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'" Lamott writes, "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, when I hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."

In our gospel lesson for today, we hear words that speak directly to the longing of the human heart for a home. But our experiences have taught us that our home can be found in almost any locale, and among almost any group of people, because no matter where we go, God is already there, making a place for us. It's as Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In 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? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may also be."