

A LITURGY OF HOME

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis

October 8, 2017

Scripture: Isaiah 2:2-4; Matthew 4: 12-17

In the days we live in now, the chaos of the world is very present with us. This week has brought yet another hurricane, this time through Central America and the Gulf Coast. Last Sunday night, a violent shooting in Las Vegas left 59 people dead, and countless others injured, scared and reeling from those horrific events. Let us begin with a moment of silence for those who were impacted by these tragedies, those whose homes were in the path of this hurricane, and who call Las Vegas their home: (moment of silence)

A few weeks ago we launched a new midweek Bible study at lunchtime called “The Storyteller in Us.” The first theme we discussed in this bible study was on the theme of home. The people gathered around the table had wonderful stories to share of their memories of the homes of their childhood and the homes they made in their adulthood. We talked about the sights and smells and feel of home. The things that no matter where we are, conjure up that space. For some, the home of childhood was not always safe, and the longing to be elsewhere was a desire for another kind of home. It reminded all of us that sometimes we fantasize about home to the point where it becomes so nostalgic, and our longing for it overcomes the present.

I was quite moved by the stories that were shared, the resonance to space and landscape that came out in the memories. Toward the end of our discussion, one of our members, Sally Anderson shared this wonderful saying that she relies on for her own grounding: “Be thine own home, and in thyself dwell.” Those words are a great reminder that home can be multiple places, and likely will be throughout the course of our life. Where we find home has much to do with how we understand ourselves and where we are standing in any present moment.

One of the Bible passages we read for that Bible study was this one that Will read for us from the community of Matthew about Jesus making his home in Capernaum. I shared with the group that day that I became more and more fascinated with this idea of Jesus making a home in Capernaum because in biblical theology home is actually a very elusive idea. When we think about Jesus, we don’t think about him having a home that he goes back and forth to and from in his ministry. We don’t think of him walking through the door and laying his keys on the table by the door, or forgetting to pick up milk, or trying to find someone to water the plants, or feed the cat while he’s out preaching in Galilee.

That he might have piles of scrolls from a midrash study or bills to pay or photos of family and friends by the couch where his favorite blanket is draped. The idea changes how we see him, what we imagine he is experiencing at home and away.

The people in the stories of much of our scriptures are not people with a home per se, they are people who are constantly seeking home. The disciples get called away from home. Abram and Sarai get called to move and create a new home. The people move to Egypt in famine and out of Egypt and slavery and begin an epic search for home moving through the desert. If anything, the Biblical story seems to suggest that our faith demands a pulling away from home.

I used to think that home was one place that you anchored to for your whole life. Home was that place of childhood comforts that you translated into your adult life and somehow, and lived happily ever after. There's no place like home to exercise an over-active nostalgic imagination. Part of what the biblical story of home teaches is that there is a certain amount of getting lost in our stories of home.

Rebecca Solit in her book, "A Field Guide to Getting Lost" echoes the ideas of the biblical characters being lost on the way home. She expands the metaphor of home by redefining the relationship of home and loss in these words:

Lost really has two desperate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. There are objects and people that disappear from your sight or knowledge or possession; you lose a bracelet, a friend, the key. You still know where you are. Everything is familiar except there is one item less, one missing element. Or you get lost, in which case the world has become larger than your knowledge of it. Either way, there is a loss of control. Imagine yourself streaming through time shedding gloves, umbrellas, wrenches, books, friends, homes, names. This is what the view looks like if you take a rear-facing seat on the train. Looking forward you constantly acquire moments of arrival, moments of realization, moments of discovery. The wind blows your hair back and you are greeted by what you have never seen before. The material falls away in onrushing experience. It peels off like skin from a molting snake. Of course to forget the past is to lose the sense of loss that is also memory of an absent richness and a set of clues to navigate the present by; the art is not one of forgetting but of letting go. When everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss (22-23)

Thinking about those objects we lose over time put me in mind of what a privilege it even is to be able to breathe and reflect on those losses. I have been very moved by various artists from groups like the Undocumented Migration Project who have been collecting items that refugees in various places around the world have left behind, by choice and by force. Toothbrushes, backpacks, perfume bottles, condoms, notebooks, spoons, the list is endless. The most powerful images to me were the ones of these left behind items grouped with like items. It is stunning to see many worn wallets laying in a pile. Somehow those images pull on the commonality of human experience and the commonality of what we carry, of what makes for home. With over 22 million refugees worldwide and 65 million people forcibly displaced, the issue of home in our world today, the relationship between home and loss is not just a personal issue, it's a global one. According to the UNHRC, a majority of these refugees come from three countries - South Sudan, Syria and Afghanistan. I'm happy that our own refugee program is continuing this year, after we had the opportunity to learn so much in our partnership last year. You'll be hearing more details this week, but we received word just a few days ago that a new family from Afghanistan is in need of a partner church and we will again have an opportunity to learn firsthand about their experiences and accompany them as they resettle here.

One of the books of stories of home that I stumbled across is the literary journal *Freeman's*. The theme of the fall issues is about home. The scope of the essays address a diversity of experience across the globe, including numerous writing about refugee experiences. In his introduction, the editor John Freeman reveals his own story of home with the introductory sentence, "For much of my life, home has been elsewhere." He continues to play with the

metaphor about how home is built by the authors collected in this journal, how they use movement as metaphor - not unlike what we discussed earlier about Jesus' own movement through Galilee. He suggests an important point for our consideration when he asserts: "The building materials of home do not exist in a world of plain geometry; they are constantly changing shape and weight" (ix). He invites us to "eavesdrop on their narrative hammering, to watch them rise beams. They are intimate, difficult, sometimes amusing, and beautifully textured stories..." (ix). The idea of home is something that is built, something we construct through the stories we share, the memories we share. The building materials of how we build a church home change weight and shape as well.

In a few weekends, we are hosting the Love Welcome conference focused on the unique issues for LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers in this current refugee crisis. There has been a lot of excitement and interest in this topic. We have heard from people all over the country and even abroad about how glad they are that this conversation is happening. Many of them know the unique issues of home in relation to LGBTQ experiences. Our separation from childhood places and geography are shaped by hospitality we did or didn't receive in those places, in our childhood homes, in our childhood communities. These same difficult issues are amplified exponentially for those who are also having to flee their communities and countries because of political upheaval and violence. Those stories will be added to our rich stories of home and loss as we listen together.

One of the essays in Freeman's journal was by the writer Rabih Alameddine titled "Hope and Home." He writes about his experience being back home in Beirut visiting family and letting his mother pamper him. A friend asks him if he wants to visit one of the refugee camps with him. Lebanon has the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. He admits openly that he was unprepared for those encounters. He recounts stories of visiting various compounds and he tells this story about a visit to a compound in Sidon. There was a woman who had just been married, and other woman in the house wanted him to meet her. She shared with him that she had been married just two days before to her first cousin, "there would be no honeymoon." He recounts what happened when she called her aunt to come talk to him:

"A firebrand, the aunt stormed out of her room. I could hear her approach, stomping on the cement, even though she wore soft slippers. "Why should I talk to him?" She yelled. "Why? I've talked to journalists, to do-gooders, to everyone. Over and over. Told our stories many times. Does anyone do anything? No." With a dismissive wave of her hand and flick of her left eyebrow, she glared at me. "If I talk to you will anything change?"

"No," I said, "I'm sorry. Nothing with change."

She regarded me askance for a brief moment and told her story." (79)

Alameddine tells vignette after vignette like this one. He tells about the young woman in her mid-twenties who intricately and beautifully decorated her pantry door with sequins, because that is what someone had sent. He boldly gives praise, "To whoever thought it was a good idea to donate thousands of sequins to Syrian refugees who had nothing left, whose entire lives had been extirpated: Bless your heart." (83)

These stories and many more make up what Freeman names "a liturgy of home." This old church has its stories that make up our liturgy of home, but we are in no way done building. We

are adding new stories all the time, using new materials all the time. Stories of children, stories of parents, stories of ushers, stories of the voices that sing in our choir, stories of our youth, stories of our Deacons, of young adults, multitudes of stories. The hammering might be a little louder for a bit of time, but part of knowing where home is at is telling its stories. Our own lives call us to this challenge as well. It is a challenge to embrace diversity of home, and it is testament to the openness here that topics like home apply equally to our seniors, to our college students, to those involved in our refugee program.

Among us today are stories of all stages of home. We no longer have one story of home. We have varied and diverse stories of home. People who are moving to different cities, to ours and away. People are shifting vocations, people are retiring, people are finally finding home after a long, long search. Some are creating home for the first time, some are separating and trying to make a new home. Some are just biding their time away from home, until the work opportunities are right to return. Among us are people who are lost, people who have stumbled, people who are in a rear-facing seat on the train. It is the intimacy of our stories that creates our liturgy of home. Wherever we are, whoever we are, God lends us the tools, the experiences, the space to make our home among each other and tell stories of our building, of our triumphs and our loss. We know that if told with kindness, no one story is more important than another. There is not either/or when we are expressing the building materials of home. Home is both/and. Home is what we remember what we have gained and what we have lost, where our stories can always be shared.