

“To Be Home”
Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10,22-22:5; John 14:23-29
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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I went to a poetry reading Thursday night with some of you . . . My friend Ava Haymon was reading from her new book of poetry at the Fountain Bookstore downtown. As she was preparing to read a poem about a little girl steeling herself to do something hard and bold (and thinking about her mom as she did), Ava reflected for a minute on the needs of children, and the inability of their mothers to meet all of those needs. She shook her head and said, “The only time your mother provided a perfectly safe home for you – with everything you needed or wanted *right there* – was when you were still *inside her womb*. It’s all downhill after that.”

(I’m thinking that’s something a male preacher couldn’t say on Mother’s Day!
As a mother myself I own to it.)

Once you emerge from the womb, it is impossible to find (or provide) an ideal home. No one’s home is perfect. Each has its share of disappointments and stressors and reasons to grieve. That isn’t just the parents’ fault. Children can wreck it themselves. It’s part of the human condition, I think. Today’s prayer of confession said that we fail to live as God created us to live. We don’t fully understand what loving means. We are afraid, hasty, selfish. Call it weakness . . . call it brokenness . . . call it sin. Whatever it is, it affects the homes that we build and share. It affects all of us.

At their best, though, our homes are places we can be ourselves. Places of welcome. Place of love. Places we can put up our feet and rest, or roll up our sleeves and work. Whether it’s a private home or a public one – like this church home, for instance – a good home offers grace and encouragement – *deep acceptance* that calls us forward to be our best. That’s what we yearn for, isn’t it? I think that’s why people rejoice at Christ’s promise that he’s going to prepare a place for us. We can imagine the kind of home Christ would prepare. A *perfect* home, right? It’s what we long for.

In a reflection on the four texts we read from the scriptures today, Walter Brueggemann says that

Easter is an invitation to homecoming. The big picture of homecoming [is about more than your needs or mine. It concerns “the healing of the nations,” as envisioned in Revelation – a time when the nations will not be fearful or aggressive, because every nation will be safe and cared for (Revelation 22:2). The small picture of homecoming] is of a woman, Lydia, in Macedonia where Paul came to preach. We are told that [God opened Lydia’s heart to listen eagerly]; she was in a moment of readiness, disposed to listen as “a worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14). As she listened, she responded by inviting Paul to stay in her home. She practiced hospitality, opening her home in welcome. [Walter suggests that the

practice of hospitality may be] the ultimate outcome of the Easter season, when there is no fear of others, but the readiness to host (see Romans 12:13).

[Walter says the connection between the healing of the nations in Revelation and Lydia's hospitality in Acts] is the gospel news that God will make God's own home in our midst (John 14:23). [Jesus says that God is ready to take up residence where we are. To those who love God, God will come. "We will make our home with them," Jesus said. That good news contradicts all the fear and aggressiveness of the world. To his disciples the risen Christ comes and says "peace" (John 14:27). Where he comes, there is peace. [That's the good news of Easter – that the risen Christ invites us away from the disappointment and dysfunction and fear so familiar to us. He invites us *into his peace* – his welcome, his acceptance, his "home" for us. Christ further invites us to listen and host and welcome God into our lives – to receive God into our hearts, so God can make a home right here. Walter says that when we open ourselves to do this, we can break the cycles that keep wounding nations and communities and people like you and me.]¹

How? When the homecoming we find in God becomes a homecoming we offer to others. When the peace we find in God prepares us to host.

My friend Michael Lindvall suggests that the *cross* can serve to remind us of ways that the support and acceptance we *receive* from God is tied to the support and acceptance we're made able to *give* other people. "Imagine that the upright line [in the cross] is like God's love come down to us, as it were, imagining for a moment that God is up and we are down. As such, the vertical is a drawing of the expansiveness of God [who chooses every day to make a home with us.] The crossbar . . . reminds us of the [love that *we* extend to others, indeed to the world, as we expand beyond ourselves, just as God expands beyond God's Self."² The cross is not a cross with just one line, Michael says. And the Christian faith is not the Christian faith without God's love received, returned and *shared*. We find a home in God; we make a home for others.

We call this practice of making room for others "hospitality." Too often hospitality is reduced to the practice of inviting people into your house or office for a cup of tea, a meal, even a good night's sleep – what Lydia offered to Paul. I like what Barbara Brown Taylor says about this. She says,

Jesus did not have a home he could welcome people into. He could not cook anyone a meal nor offer anyone a bed, which may be what gave him such a hospitable heart. While others opened their homes to him, lending Jesus a table to preside over for a night, his own [hospitality] was much more likely to take place in a field or a boat, on a road or a mountain – wherever people who felt like strangers happened to meet the person who made them feel like kin [. . . who

¹ Living the Word, "Refusing the Deathly World of Anxiety," Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C, by Walter Brueggemann.

² *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, by Michael L. Lindvall, Geneva Press, Louisville, 2001. p 120.

made them feel “at home”]. It was a gift Jesus had, this divine practice of encounter, so valuable to him that he did his best to teach his followers how to do it, too.³

Love your neighbor as yourself, he said, and he showed us lots of ways to do that.

Barbara Brown Taylor – a self-proclaimed introvert and quiet person – says that this is no easy thing for her: to love her neighbor as herself . . . to make room even for strangers in her life. How to do that? Barbara suggests warming up for the effort by focusing on

one of the human beings who usually sneak right past you because they are performing some mundane service such as taking your order or handing you your change. The next time you go to the grocery store, try engaging the cashier [Barbara says. You do not have to invite her to your house] for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find “arugula” on her laminated list of produce . . .

“You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at [Kroger] today,” she says, looking right at you. All that is required of you [in this first step of hospitality] is to look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say “Thanks.” Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen.⁴

To see and be seen can be a profound experience, and one that opens us to more radical acts of hospitality. That’s why, says Barbara, as simple and even silly as such a small effort may sound, those who attempt it often meet with huge inner resistance.

I do not *want* to encounter another human being at the cash register [I just want my groceries so I can get on with my day. And that] will become interminable if I have to stop and do this [eye-to-eye thing with everyone who crosses my path. Surely they have other people in their lives to see who they are. Surely other people can make some room for them.]

It’s OK to feel that way, if you ask me. A self-proclaimed introvert and quiet person, I think it’s natural to feel reluctant sometimes, to feel challenged or tired by the call to life in community . . . to worry where it might lead. To attend to the weariness or apprehension we might feel about encountering others is important, I think. It’s a small act of hospitality we extend to ourselves, and no less than God extends to us. But there is no reason to think that if we “pass” on the chance to welcome and care for another person, somebody else will step in to do what we failed to do. So many people are profoundly lonely; they have no one seeing them, no one making room for them. The truth is, even the smallest gesture of welcome and acknowledgment can bear manifold blessings – and not just to the recipient of the gesture, but to the person who makes it, too.

³ *An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, HarperOne, 2009. p 98.

⁴ This and the following quote, Barbara Brown Taylor, 94-95.

As God is fundamentally relational, so are we. We were created for life in communion with God *and* in relationship with each other: both beams of the cross. By the cross, we are brought close to God. Christ sets a place for us at the table. He prepares a room for us in the household of God. *We are welcomed home* by a God who knows us entirely and who loves and accepts us still. To share that kind of welcome with other people is just part of the deal – part of the Christian faith. It's not the only way to be spiritual – not the only way to work for the healing of the world. But to share God's love in community is part of what makes us human. It's one of the most important things we do.

This side of the womb, we are all wanderers in search of home. It's a human gift and responsibility both, to *provide* a home – even a *taste* of home – for one another.