

Home
May 7, 2023
Jemez Spring Presbyterian Church
John 14 vs 1-7
Rev. Trey Hammond

It is a great honor to be preaching this morning at Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church. The Jemez River Valley is one of my favorite places on Earth. I am glad to provide a little bit of a break for my talented and busy clergy colleague, Takako Terino, just back from a national conference with the Spiritual Direction Institute.

The Gospel lesson today is a familiar one for many of us...one we often hear at funerals and memorial services...it comes from the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel. This conversation with the disciples happens after the Last Supper, when Jesus tells his close friends, in the familial way he refers to God..."In my Father's house there are many dwelling places...many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you and will bring you there...to be with me in your eternal home. [This promise is front and center in the great hymn we will sing today by Isaac Watts, "Our God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy past, and our eternal home.] Home...the place that is such an important habitat and grounding for us in this earthly life and a promise for the life to come.

As a bit of an aside, Shannon Webster and I both went to McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and we both studied homiletics, the discipline of crafting sermons, with professor Don Wardlaw. In those days there was a movement towards a more narrative, informal style of preaching versus the more formal, traditional style of previous generations. That earlier sermon pattern was characterized, a bit sarcastically, as having three points... and a tear, which was usually brought about by the sharing of a touching story.

This morning, I will tweak that pattern and this sermon will have three points and a chuckle, as I have found in my career, a little mirth is sometimes good for a congregation in worship. So, going old school homiletics, the three three points of this sermon named “Home” are our earthly homes, our church homes, and our heavenly home.

Over the course of our lives, most of us have all lived in a number of earthly homes. Ones that range from our childhood residence to the one we inhabit now. Let me make a little mirth about the 21st century residences we live in now. Most of our homes now have connections to a larger digital world and that virtual presence is a real part of our lives. I heard this humorous story about a modern well-wired, internet connected American home. A man shared with his friend, “You know my wife recently asked me why I was speaking so softly in the house. I replied to her that “I was afraid that Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, probably was listening in on our conversation! First, she laughed....then I laughed....then Alexa laughed....and finally Siri laughed. Personally, as I have a Google phone and I call the cyber entity that it contains...Ms. Googly...she would have laughed also. Our homes are inhabited in new ways, unexpected ways, in this modern world....suggesting we are never completely “home alone”

I do believe our earthly homes are important in our lives, not only as a place of safety and comfort and sharing life with others, but that they become places of meaning and memories. Over the course of our lives, our homes play different roles. We grow and change, people come and go, times are hard, and times are good. I appreciate this thoughtful quote about home from John Pearce, “Home is a place you grow up wanting to leave, and grow old wanting to get back to.”

In many years of working with a program in Albuquerque called Heading Home, which serves the unhoused, whenever I asked a person who was experiencing homelessness what they hoped for, not unexpectedly, the usual answer was quite simply, “a home.”

Our homes can be a refuge from the turmoil of the world, a place of rest from our labors, a community of belonging, and a table where we are fed. Each home we live in has a distinct character, not just from its location and architecture, and also from the experiences we have while living in it.

Certainly, one of the common experiences all of us shared during the COVID pandemic was that we spent a great deal more time at home than usual, out of necessity. The down side of of this “stay at home” mandate was for some a sense of being confined and the isolation was a little crazy making and lonely.

However, I hope the upside was that we discovered some new things about our home, ones that we tend to take for granted. {{Maybe an interesting exercise to have after church today is a conversation with someone about what you discovered about your home and your connection to it in the past few couple of years.}} Maybe you discovered some nook or cranny of your home that has taken on new meaning. Or maybe you, like me, in the cleaning out of drawers and closets, because you had more time, you came across a card or gift or picture from a loved one that made you feel connected across time and distance. Maybe you even reached out and contacted them.

I have a great deal of religious art in my house and though I had always treasured the beauty of the pieces, it was during the pandemic that those icons of the divine brought me even closer to God. I know for me, though I had lived in my house in Albuquerque for 20 years, it was in the first year of the pandemic that I felt like I

fully inhabited my house, as more than just a place to eat and sleep. I realized just how life giving my house had been in the past and was especially now during this time of isolation. My home became more of a sanctuary than it had ever been. Maybe we all had new eyes to see the place we inhabit....how it is a place of comfort, memories, and beauty. Our homes really are a reflection of who we are and what we are becoming, what we value, and they serve as galleries of things we find beautiful. In many ways, our homes are an exterior expression of our interior landscape. So, if our inner landscape is connected with the divine, it will likely find its way into our habitations.

In clearing one of those drawers in the middle of the pandemic, I came across a Celtic House Blessing and it seemed right to ask God's blessing on **my** house in this extraordinary time. House blessings are common in Ireland and Scotland and implicit in the blessing is the belief that our earthly home is a foretaste of our eternal home. The blessing begins with this prayer. "Gracious God, keep watch over all who live here, their going out and their coming home. May they dwell here, secure in your peace, extending your hospitality to all." The blessing service ends with this benediction:

God bless the windows and the door

God bless us all evermore.

God bless this house with fire and light

God bless each room with all thy might

God with your hand keep us right

God be with us in this dwelling site

A second learning from the pandemic is recognizing just how much our church homes mean to us, especially when houses of faith had to stop gathering so

suddenly. So many of the activities that brought us together as community - Sunday worship, Christmas and Easter services, potlucks and meals together, memorial services, and the hosting of larger community events had to be canceled. Thankfully most churches figured out ways to carry on church life virtually, and we are grateful that such technology existed to allow access to share worship electronically.

However, most people still grieved the loss of worshipping together, the interruption of those weekly meaningful connections that bound us together as the body of Christ. I am sure this house of God is very glad to be back together and able share in the life of the larger community, which you do so well. Clearly there were lessons to be learned by all our churches from this sojourn through the pandemic wilderness.

Finally there is the heavenly home that Jesus promised, "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 and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you will be also."

I believe all that is good about our earthly homes and our church homes is but a foretaste of the eternal home, the heavenly home that Jesus has promised us. I know that when we leave this life, we will take nothing of these earthly homes to the eternal dwelling place in God, except the sense of home that is embedded in our minds and souls. I do believe that we get glimpses and foretastes of our eternal home in this mortal existence.

Some years ago I had the privilege of being with a saint of a woman, from a church I served in Dallas, who was in hospice care. She was aware that she was near the end of her life and was drifting in and out of consciousness as members of her family touched her face...held her hand...whispered words of thanks for her love and goodness and her radiant faith. Her breath became more and more shallow and

she mumbled quietly. Then suddenly her eyes were wide open... a joyous smile crossed her face...and she spoke excitedly and passionately...saying “O my God, it is so beautiful...I am home!” She then slipped back into a deep sleep and soon she was gone...gone home.

Jesus promises that in God’s house there are many dwelling places and Christ will prepare a place for us, his disciples, his beloved, so that where he is, there we will be also...that is the promised heavenly home God offers and Christ takes us to. May we find in every experience of our lives, including pandemics and the many homes we have inhabited...God’s assurance of that promised place where each one of us can say, “O my God...it is beautiful...I am home.” Thanks be to God, Amen.