

How Can a Home in God Shape Us?

Beloved friends – created and sourced by the immeasurable Love that is God, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how can a home in God shape us? With deep gratitude, we have gathered this morning to worship God on this fourteenth of twenty-six Sundays in our long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year. We are together via livestream and here with this land which has been in relationship with people for millennia before us. As we move into this time of wondering, let's first pause to pray.

God of all, we need to feel your presence within and among us today. We long to be comforted and challenged by your love. Teach us to recognize how we are at home in you. Open and embolden our hearts and minds, that we might live out of a sense of grounding in our home in you. Amen.

Fellow journeyers, this morning's scripture readings invite us to reflect on our experiences of being at home in God – that is, at home in the source of all love and life. The Psalmist sings with joy and gratitude about the experience of dwelling in the heart of love. The author of the letter to the Ephesians (likely a disciple of the Apostle Paul) invites readers and listeners to draw strength from the power of the good news of God's love known in Christ.

Beyond these readings from Psalms and Ephesians and across the arc of the past week, I encountered three additional sources of inspiration for this morning's reflection: 1) Governor Walz's public interactions with his children, 2) the thresholds we cross in many spaces – including at front doors to homes as depicted on the cover of our worship bulletin, and 3) our church's vision statement. Let's briefly explore each of these.

Amidst our strong political diversity, many Americans were captivated this past week by video footage and images of our Governor Walz's children, Hope and Gus, responding to and interacting with him on the evening in which he spoke to the Democratic National Convention. In one of the moments in which Governor Walz spoke of his daughter Hope by name, she responded by forming a heart with her hands and holding it at heart center while looking directly at him. In another moment, Gus stood weeping and applauding effusively, uttering in the most full-bodied way imaginable, "That's my dad!" Later, delegates in Chicago and spectators at home watched as those family members embraced one another. I have an unshakeable sense that those children and their father know a deep sense of home with one another.

Thresholds. Home can be a place of rest, affirmation, encouragement. Inevitably, it is also a place from which we go forth to encounter the joys and challenges of life. We do well to find and nurture spaces of home that equip us and others with the rest, affirmation, and encouragement needed for facing the joys and challenges of life beyond the thresholds – those times and spaces in which we find ourselves apart from the places and people whom we consider home.

Finally, in addition to the recent public interactions between Governor Walz and his children and my ponderings about thresholds, I have been inspired by our church's vision statement (which is newly part of my e-mail footer). Our vision evokes a sense of home. *"We envision an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice."* How do you contribute to expanding and sustaining this safe harbor we endeavor to be? How will we participate, shoulder to shoulder, in working with God toward love and justice?

In a moment, I'll invite us to bring to mind and heart some of the places and people we have called home. We'll notice both concrete and intangible aspects of home. As I've studied the concept of home in the past week, four qualities have stood out:

- First, home as a dwelling place – a place of shelter and refuge, a space in which to reside
- Second, home as belonging – being a member of a group coexisting with each other
- Third, home as familiarity – a place or space of comfort and routine
- And finally, home as a place of origin – a space whose values and behaviors form us, and whose values and behaviors we enact wherever we go.

Now I invite each of us to bring to mind and heart a place or person who has been home for you – past or present. I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so. First, simply ask yourself: where or with whom have I most felt at home. The questions I'm about to ask may evoke several different homes. I hope this will be an exercise of gratitude for us. If we recognize with greater clarity how someone or somewhere has been home, we can also find opportunities to recognize, express thanks, and honor our experiences of home.

Let's use those four qualities of home to identify some of what has made somewhere or someone a home for each of us. Continuing to hold your eyes closed, can you see that place or person you've brought to mind?

How has that one provided a dwelling place for you – a space of shelter, a presence in which to reside? Who or what has made it a dwelling place or refuge for you?

How has that one provided a space of belonging? Where or with whom have you coexisted harmoniously in a space of home? Whose love has offered you a sense of belonging – an opportunity to trust that you are welcome, accepted, and appreciated just as you are?

How has that one provided a space of familiarity? What routines in that place or with that person have created an experience of comfort for you? Precisely where do you rest, relax, laugh, breathe? In what ways have you felt deeply connected to the rhythms of that place or person?

And finally, **how has that one provided a space of origin** – a place or person whose values and behaviors form you and whose values and behaviors you enact (consciously or subconsciously) wherever you go?

I invite you to open your eyes. And would anyone like to name aloud – simply name – that place or person who has been a home? [*this church community, wind moving through tall, old white pines*] Home.

What a joy it can be to recognize being at home! Yet we also hold space for the ways in which we and others have each been hurt in spaces we've called home but which were not safe for dwelling, belonging, familiarity, and origin. We seek forgiveness whenever forgiveness is possible. And we hold space for times when we and others have not felt securely connected to a place or person we were calling home. I encourage us to continue to wonder about where and with whom we most experience a dwelling place, belonging, familiarity, origin.

The best news is that our God transcends any particular time or place and God's love is intertwined with each of our beings much more deeply than we can possibly intertwine with any one place or person.

As a segue to examining our scripture readings for today, I offer these words from a song called “Home” by my friend, Karl Werne:

*“I set out on this journey soul searching
Don't know how much farther I can go
But there is meaning hidden in the strangest of all places
And I do believe that I have found a home...
...See, I don't really care
I could live anywhere
To find some Peace inside
That's where I call Home”*

Let's hear Karl's words again:

*“I set out on this journey soul searching
Don't know how much farther I can go
But there is meaning hidden in the strangest of all places
And I do believe that I have found a home...
...See, I don't really care
I could live anywhere
To find some Peace inside
That's where I call Home”*

This peace inside of which Karl sings resonates with me as God's Love dwelling in the core of each of us. Could it be that God's Love is our truest home – that God's love from which nothing can separate us is our place of most refuge, belonging, familiarity, origin?

Let's hear again a few words from the Psalmist. This time I'll read excerpts from *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, which author Nan Merrill wrote as a companion text to the Psalms.

She wrote the following in conversation with parts of Psalm 84. I invite you to close your eyes again if it helps you to hear and feel the words more clearly. Welcome them wash over you as a reminder that you are at home in God's Love and that God's Love is at home in you.

*"How glorious is your dwelling place, O Blessed Architect of the universe!
My soul longs, yes, aches for the abode of the Beloved;
All that is within me sings for joy to the living Heart of Love!...*

*You invite us to dwell within your Heart.
Blessed are they whose hearts are filled with love,
Who sing praises to You with grateful hearts!
Blessed are they who put their strength in You,
Who choose to share the joy and sorrows of the world.
They do not give way to fear or doubt;
They are quickened by Divine Light and Power,
They dwell within the peace of the Most High.
They go from strength to strength and live with integrity...*

*For a day within the Heart of Love is more to be desired than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a servant in your dwelling place,
than live in riches among those who know not Love."*

The Psalmist is speaking of us dwelling in God and God dwelling in us (and us finding our belonging and familiarity there).

I have shared before words from teacher and author James Finley, who speaks briefly of the power of being grounded in God's love.

He writes, *“If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love.”*

Finley’s words also speak to our reading from Ephesians in which we hear more about God as our home as in God as our origin.

Before reading part of that passage again, I want to put some context around the heavy, strong words of devil and evil. Those have been part of our lives as Christians and humans as millennia for sure. And when we speak of evil in our tradition, we are often speaking of systemic sin. If sin is the possibility that we fall out of balance with loving another, loving God with us, loving ourselves; then systemic sin (evil) is that powerful way in which the systems of our world will oppress some (many) through collective sin (evil). That is what I believe the author to the Ephesians is speaking about going out into the world and confronting.

They write: *“Finally, draw your strength from Christ and from the strength of that mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand firm against the tactics of the Devil. Our battle ultimately is not against human forces, but against the sovereignties and powers, the rulers of the world of darkness, and the evil spirits of the heavenly realms. You must put on the armor of God if you are to resist on the evil day and, having done everything you can, to hold your ground. Stand fast then, with **truth** as the belt around your waist, **justice** as your breastplate, and **zeal to spread the Good News of peace** as your footgear. In all circumstances, hold **faith** up before you as your shield; it will help you extinguish the fiery darts of the Evil One. Put on the helmet of **salvation**, and carry the sword of the Spirit, which is the **word of God**.”*

We go out equipped from our origin in the Love of God with such things as truth, justice, zeal to spread peace, faith, salvation, and the word of Love.

As a church who seeks to be *“an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice,”* may we embody that vision by offering a space of refuge, belonging, familiarity that grows with relationships, and origin that is carried forward by the values and behaviors we enact wherever we go.

I will close with a quote from Richard Hooker, sixteenth century priest in the Church of England. Hooker said, *“I pray that none will be offended if I seek to make the Christian religion an inn where all are received joyously, rather than a cottage where some few friends of the family are to be received.”*

May we open our arms every more widely to expand this space of dwelling, belonging, familiarity, and origin – of being at home in God’s Love. That Love is counting on us. Amen.

August 25, 2024
St. Croix United Church @ People’s Park
Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20