The Way Home

A Meditation on John 14: 1 – 14 and Acts 7: 55 – 60

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church May 10, 2020

My oldest brother is a prolific writer, mostly humorous pieces, commentaries on our political situation, or survival pieces about the never ending winter in Maine, or reflections about his canine companions. He also pulls out memories – from his childhood adventures playing Tarzan in a loin cloth in our back yard to his incredible experiences as a high school history teacher in Pennsylvania and everything in between. This week, he sent me the following story, and he swears it is true.

*A guy from my hometown whom I knew in college experienced something that most of my friends were threatened with, and that we sometimes threatened our children with, but he was the only guy I ever knew that it actually happened to:  Between the time he left for college in August of his freshman year, and the time he returned for Thanksgiving, his parents moved away and did not leave a forwarding address.*

*How he found out was, he came home for Thanksgiving and found the door to his house locked, but he had a key, so he opened the door and went in, through the front door actually, which you would never do at my house, but that’s his family, and his family was different from mine.  My family, for example, never moved away without telling me.  I mean, it hardly seems sporting.  Sure there was that time they let me out at an interstate highway rest area in one of those big rectangular states out west and then drove off, but I was able to find my way back home in just two or three years, so the joke was on them.*

*When he stepped into the house, there was nothing there.  The place was completely empty.  Empty as when if you make a noise the place sounds hollow because there is no furniture or books or anything to absorb the sound.  He looked through a few rooms further to confirm, but yes, the entire house was empty.  And a little spooky.*

*He stepped back outside to ponder this new development, and as he stood on the front steps, he saw the For Sale sign in the yard.  He went and looked at it.  He went back to the driveway and his car.  He thought for a few minutes about his relationship with his parents, searching for something he might have done that led to this situation.  Admittedly, he had a few black marks on his record, but he thought most of them were past their expiration date, that is, the statute of limitations.  He didn’t think of himself as every mother’s idea of the ideal son, but neither did he think of himself as someone whose misdeeds were beyond forgiveness.  Sure, his father had threatened a few times, but that was just bluster . . .*

*He thought about what to do.  He noticed the neighbors lights on and he decided to go knock on their door, which was a good idea because they were quickly able to clear up the whole mystery.  “Many years ago, when you were still small, your parents were looking for a new house, and your mother found her dream house right here on our street.  Unfortunately, it was not for sale, and not likely to be for sale anytime soon.  But there was another for sale, and they liked the street and the neighborhood, so your parents became our next-door neighbors.*

*“Recently, the last couple of weeks really, your mother was driving home and as she turned onto our street, she saw a For Sale sign.  It had just gone up that day.  And it was on the lawn of her dream house.  She pulled into the drive, rang the doorbell, and made an offer.  They accepted it.  The couple moved out and your parents moved in.  I’m sure they meant to tell you; what with the moving and all, they just didn’t get a chance.  No, really.  I’m certain they planned to tell you . . . someday.”*

What happens if home as you know it, if family, has moved without leaving a forwarding address? As the apostles faced the truth that Jesus would not be with them much longer, they felt as if this were the reality in which they were living. Jesus was their dwelling place. This homeless, wandering rabbi was their home, the rock of their family. They had left their lives behind to be with him, and they could never go back. Well, they could, but they would be forever restless for the home which Jesus had been to them. UMC pastor Rev. Dr. Gayle Landis says it this way: *The way home is not about going to a place, it is about the relationships that make the place home.* To be in relationship with God is to be home.

The question disturbing the disciples was how to be in relationship with Jesus once Jesus had left them. When life became more frightening, as it would with Jesus’ death, and the persecution of his followers, how could they trust that God had not moved away, leaving no instructions on how to be found.

Here’s the promise Jesus offers: you will always know the way to God’s home. Always. And we want to shout back, “Really?? Are you sure about that?” Because right now it sometimes feels like God has moved and the house is echoing from the emptiness. There is so much pain around us, so much distrust, so much brokenness. Political, cultural, social, religious brokenness.

The disciples, though not in the midst of a pandemic, knew this fear. They were confused. Lost. Unsure of how to be in this world without Jesus’ physical presence. Breath by breath, they found the way. They received the gift of the Spirit and believed that they were empowered to live in relationship with God in new-old ways. New because Jesus was not beside them in body; old because the world itself had not changed. The world was still in need of hope, healing, forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. And love. So - much - love.

Our companion scripture is about the absence of love, isn’t it? Or at least the absence of tolerance. In Acts we hear the story of a man who is on his way home to God too soon. Stephen is about to be executed for speaking truth. In our day, people might walk out on a sermon that makes them mad and call the pastor on Monday…or, well, today, you could just turn off whatever device you are watching and send an email. But this was rage and Stephen knew it. He looks to the sky; he sees that God’s home *has come to meet him*, and Jesus is standing beside God. This is the only instance we have of Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. All other references of a heavenly Jesus have him *sitting* at God’s right hand. Though Jesus could not rescue Stephen, he would stand up to welcome his brother home. He would stand up to honor him and gather him in. He would stand up in witness to the man who had witnessed to him.

Stephen was killed for saying things that people didn’t want to hear. He was killed for saying that God cared more about justice and mercy than about religious rituals. And before you say, that was then and this is now…we have our rituals, too. Expectations about the way we think things *should* be in church. Especially when it comes to music. Or children. Stephen was killed because he reminded the men gathered there that prophets are never easy on us and that prophets will never go away. We still haven’t really listened. We still silence prophets.

Sometimes prophets use words, they preach. Other times, prophets sing, or create art or write an editorial, or take a photograph that will be forever seared in our memories. Prophets come in many forms – there are prophetic moments and prophetic places. The Ford Theater, the Edmund Pettis bridge, the Lorraine Motel, the Stonewall Inn…I know you could name many more. We have communal prophetic places and individual places, too. One of the most recent and most searing is the Memorial for Peace & Justice in Montgomery, a tribute to all those who have been lynched in our nation. And I wonder how many white people won’t go there because they either deny the story presented there is factual, or they just don’t think it is helpful to bring all this back up.

Well, we have to bring it up because black men are still being lynched. Ahmaud Arbery was out for a jog, and now his name is added to those of the victims through the years. His death is now added to the prophetic voices that cry out for justice and truth. I hope and pray that as he died, he saw Jesus standing at God’s side because no matter what Ahmaud believed (and I have no idea), I know that God stands on the side of the innocents. Do those who loved him wonder where God has gone? On this Mother’s Day, how can Ahmaud’s mother find comfort?

Maybe that’s why this story about my brother’s friend, Peter, troubles me so. That a family could just up and leave their son. But Peter was a young adult, and his parents were *just down the street.* It’s not like he was an abandoned child. Yet still...it just kills me. Couldn’t they have left a note on the door?? And because I received this story yesterday, I couldn’t help but place Peter’s empty house in dialogue with the passage from John about God’s house and the story of Stephen seeing Jesus welcoming him home.

Peter’s neighbor knew what had happened, and that neighbor could point the way home when home had moved. The neighbor was a witness. “Your mother has moved into the home of her dreams,” she said. So Peter went down the street, and found his mother, unpacking, and probably learned the story of why his mother loved that house so much…

So I wonder, does God sometimes allow us to enter into an empty, echo-y “house,” so that we will understand that the way we have been living out God’s dream is not how God intended? Standing in an empty house, where we expect God to be, does that help us understand what was missing? When we hear our own voice bouncing around the space, is it then that we realize that we haven’t been hearing what God was saying to us? Can we then recognize that we have allowed unholy things inside…racism, sexism, all the isms, all the privileges and abuses, and biases. When we allow those in, God has no choice but to move.

But there will always be a witness. Someone to show us the way to God’s dream home in which all people can dwell in peace.

Sometimes I need you to be that witness for me.

Sometimes I hope I can be that witness for you.

Sometimes we will all need to look to others to help us know how to find our way home.

Look for the house with the light on. You’ll find a witness there, a witness to guide you home.

Thanks be to God, who is, was and always will be, our home.

Amen.