

Rev. Dr. Pam Keckler

Earlier this summer, when I was visiting my family, I drove by the large farm where I grew up. I remembered the swings and sandbox by the weeping willow tree, the barn for my pony, that huge garden that was the length of our house, but which fed us well; the orchard where we played kick ball and “handy, Andy, over” and made snow forts after a blizzard. It was a great life for my family, including my grandmother who lived with us. A factory now stands on the land of that farm, where smoke filters into the sky each day. I mentioned to my mom, how happy I was on our farm and how we had such a great life. My mother stared at me and said, “You were just a child, but I’m glad you have good home memories. However, we worried about the crops, the animals, and money. It was no fun for the adults!” She also reminded me about the little house she and Dad had purchased when they were first married and I was a newborn. Mom said that they had to leave that beautiful place when my grandfather died suddenly. Someone had to take care of Grandma, the farm and animals. So, we moved into Grandma’s home, the place I remember with affection, but a different reality for my mother.

Home...what images come to your mind? Theologian, Frederick Buechner says, “the meaning of home is twofold: the home we remember and the home we dream of.” Or, in my case, perhaps home was a child’s memory but a new reality for a young married wife and mother.

For some of you “home” is a picture of safety, family, love, fun. Some of you may remember that one particular house that was most precious to you, the books you read there, and the people you loved there. You may have smells you recall coming from the kitchen or swinging in a tree or riding your bike with friends.

For others, you may remember the chaos, the constant moving, new schools, being alone, or sad, or perhaps afraid. Your image of home is much different, with pain or anguish. Just thinking of it now may be troubling or uncomfortable. Part of the sadness may be your imagining all other families being “happy.” And your family was anything but. And your lens was probably clouded, as others struggled silently, like yourself.

“Home” is a powerful word that can bring up all sorts of thoughts and feelings. We each react differently to those memories and images. Frederick Buechner also speaks of the lifelong search we are all engaged in to make a new home for ourselves and for our families, a search to find something like the wholeness and comfort of home with ourselves. Longing for home – longing for that love, that safety net where we are cherished, where we can be ourselves.

Our readings for this week express the feelings that our ancestors in faith experienced many centuries ago, looking at their Temple – the house of God: it wasn’t just a well-worn-out but beloved building; it was a destroyed one. The Temple was dedicated to the Lord and housed the Ark of the Covenant. It was burnt 470 years later in war. These ruins seemed to symbolize the people and their own crushed and broken hopes. They could look back to a glorious and happier time, when Solomon had dedicated the beautiful new Temple and celebrated with a prayer of thanksgiving.

In that prayer, Solomon had asked that this place would provide a spiritual home for all, for the people of Israel, as well as the foreigners who came to pray – a stranger from distant lands, not of Israel. Yet, these strangers had heard God, had experienced God and wanted to worship in the temple. In Solomon’s words, the foreigner who is seeking to worship God, longing for “home” is to be welcome. What is our reaction to those who are longing and crying for home, but have no idea where they will land?

I read about an 11 year old girl named Karina, who didn’t know how to swim, and she’d only just met the adults who were bringing her from Honduras to the U.S.-- the ones handing her an inner tube. Karina waded into the water, crossed the border alone, without a parent. She was taken to a shelter in Chicago, where she stayed for a month, and was finally released to her mother, whom she hadn’t seen in 8 years. They both longed for a home, but it would take time before they found one in a nearby state. Karina said, “There, in the Honduras, I had to grow up fast.” Now she can be a child and play.

Psalm 84 also celebrates the temple. The pilgrims have reached this place of prayer, preparation and sustenance. “How lovely is your dwelling place. My soul longs to be in your house, O God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself...” Where do sparrows live? Very close to humans. They cannot be found in forests and deserts, so they settle in urban or rural settings. Sparrows sometimes build nests close to each other, so they can share their walls. These birds are continually building their nest. Sometimes they will reuse their nest and rebuild it up to 6 times. If the nests are destroyed, they will start over or look for a new place.

But what about me? Where do I land? Where is my place of safety and shelter? Where is my home? And what is my reality?

This is college season – the freshmen are off to a new life and some of the parents are grieving. I remember crying all the way home after taking Kevin to Purdue. I was traumatized. My daughter, Amy, finally spoke up from the back seat and said, “So, are you going to be this sad when I go to college?” I do understand the parents who are trying to adjust to this new reality of “home.”

Even middle school, high school, first day of kindergarten all have their excitement as well as knowing things have changed in our home. It can startle us. How did we arrive at this point so soon?

For some, it's a marriage that is no longer, or perhaps a trial separation. You may be already thinking about the holidays coming up. Where will home be this season? Just thinking about it can knock you off balance. Because we have this image of everyone sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner and a month later, gathering around a tree full of gifts, singing carols, and enjoying great festivities. Right? Doesn't that happen in the normal, wonderful family home? Or do we just imagine and long for that home?.

Perhaps it's a question of our elders dreaming of their retirement home, but needing something different now. I'm reminded of a couple in another state who were eager to sell their home, move to a retirement place and enjoy their years together. But one of them had a stroke and needed care. The house is still not sold and their longing for home has had to completely change.

Life is always changing, but we have this fixed image in our minds that home is supposed to be a certain way. We long for home that's been a part of our dreams and our wishes and it just doesn't happen the way we had hoped. And so we grieve as we look backwards. We need to remember that we are not alone. God is with us.

Our longing for home – is often longing for connection – for community – for fellowship. Longing for safety. One way to create community is when we eat together. Those of you who are fans of Chip and Joanna Gaines from Fixer Upper, may know about the restaurant called Magnolia Table, in Waco, Texas. It is a lovely place, but the rule is that everyone has a seat at the table. There is a community room with long tables for groups of people to get to know each other. Next to the seats is a pouch or pocket on the wall. That is a place to drop your cell phone, so that you might talk to each other and just hang out. Perhaps that is what we're missing as we long for “home.”

It seems that the efforts to create community are growing. In New York, there were two female ministers who met each other through a network of young ministers, religious leaders and community organizers. Just out of college, one minister had founded an organization called the Dinner Party to help young people who had experienced a significant loss, connect with others who had a similar experience. The other minister had founded the Faith Matters Network to support young clergy working in community development.

The women wanted to bring other leaders together to talk about their faith, their life experiences, no matter their political or religious differences. Last year, they founded the People's Supper, and have sponsored more than 1,000 gatherings nationwide. The method of the suppers is simple. Anyone can host, and all that is needed is a dinner table. The organization provides a guide and ideas for conversation, i.e. "How and when did you first learn about being a citizen?" "Talk about a time when you felt excluded, threatened, or unwelcome. Talk about a time when you felt welcome and safe."

Or, "tell about a spiritual practice that is giving you strength at this time. What stories from your tradition inspire you to be your most courageous self?"

The people in these groups, who were longing for home, have found it in strangers who have become friends, sitting around a table.

My final story is about Justin. At age 15, Justin decided to leave Hong Kong and go to boarding school in London. He was the last child at home and was ready to get out and see the world.

The transition of moving to London was harder than Justin had anticipated. Because he viewed it as temporary, not intending to make it his long-term home, he kept closed off from really being there. He always had one eye on leaving and starting the next segment of his life.

One day, his view of home shifted. He went to church and listened to the scripture in worship, in a passage where Jeremiah tells Hebrew exiles living in Babylon to build homes for themselves, to settle in, and invest where they are even though it is not their real home. This resonated with Justin's experience for he felt like an exile living in London, but realized he needed to open himself to it in a new way.

He later moved to California and determined that this time he would start his life in a new city with openness to invest in a home there. He wouldn't hold himself back out of self-protection just because he didn't know how long he would stay. Justin ended up finding a place in a community and created what he called "little homes." He began "doing life" alongside his neighbors: sharing meals, talking for hours after class and work, and playing with the children living down the hall. He also was intentional to create a small circle of friends who were committed to being involved in each other's daily lives. He was longing for home and so created one. These new friends and surroundings became his little home.

So, how do we create community? How do we make a home for one another? That is our task, you know. We are to feed others, take care of their spiritual needs, offer hospitality. There are no boundaries. That's our job as Christians to provide for others. To be where people are right now. Sit with them. Listen to them. Eat with them.

Perhaps living in the moment --to not hurry out of the darkness but to let it reform us, ultimately finding God even there. There are losses to grieve in not living in the same place as family members and closest friends. There are disappointments in not having our dream home or dream life. There are discomforts in focusing on life in God rather than a great job. The young man, Justin, said, "And there is loneliness, sometimes, in staying rather than leaving, facing myself rather than the next thing."

It's hard work, but we are not alone. We have God with us and each other. Perhaps this is where we begin, starting now, as change happens in each of our lives. May you be bold and dare to create home for someone else, making the safe space to listen to the stories of their life. By inviting community into your life you are actually creating your new home in your heart. Amen.