

Easter 5A 2017, May 14, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Over the years we have been privileged to welcome into our home any number of visitors from other places throughout the world. When our children were in high school we hosted several young students from Germany who stayed with us for varying lengths of time. There was Robert and his brother Henrick, Helge and Hendrick. We've also been blessed with visitors from Tanzania; Pastor Ambele Mwaipopo, Bishop Mwakisunga and his gracious wife, Flaston Anyitike and Geoffrey Mwakihaba. Each of these different guests bless us richly with their presence. Conversation naturally turns to their home; their families, where they live. They share with us stories of their native country. We discover in each other common bonds. Though language and culture are often quite different, we soon discover common ties of home and family, dreams of a peaceful life bring us together.

The same is true when we have visited other countries and we meet people for the first time. We often find we are asked about our home life. "Where are you from, where do you live, how many in your family?" These are the questions we most often hear. The same questions we ask of our visitors. Home is a common topic, because most everyone has a home. Most everyone has a place where they live. When we are away from home for a long time we find our hearts returning, though our bodies may be away. To go home, after a long journey, whether it be physical or emotional, can be a time of restoration and healing and great joy.

Going home. In our gospel reading this morning Jesus talks about going home. "In my Father's house are many dwelling places," Jesus says. These are familiar words. Familiar to anyone who has been at a funeral of a Christian. They speak of our deepest longing; to find our home in God, to rest in God's eternal care. Older translations spoke of a heavenly mansion filled with many rooms, a kind of celestial Grand Inn conjuring up an image of one of those old magnificent hotels with crystal chandeliers and overstuffed leather chairs and high tea in the parlor at 4 in the afternoon.

Home. A home is always more than a house. Houses are buildings made with bricks and mortar, lumber and drywall. A home is that place of our most intimate relationships; husbands and wives, children and extended families. Hopes and dreams, struggles and heartaches, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows all happen at home. Homes are the places from which we leave and they are the places to which we often return. We may move far, far away from home, but find that we never really leave. We carry everything with us, some to the good and some to the bad. Home is where the ones who know us best live, know everything about us; our virtues as well as our faults, our annoying habits and endearing traits. The poet Robert Frost said it well, "Home is the place, where when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

I like the line in the old Caribbean Folk Song, "The Sloop John B." If you are Beach Boys fan, or even Van Morrison fan you may remember it. "Home. I wanna go home. Lord, I feel so broke up, I wanna go home." Home is the place we yearn for when life breaks us up, when we are lonely or feel abandoned. It doesn't matter how old you are. Images of those days of safe, secure home always seem to call us back.

St. Augustine, the great Christian philosopher of the fourth century speaks of this great yearning of the human heart. Augustine sees it as a yearning to find rest, or home, in God. "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee," Augustine writes. The human heart is indeed restless. But the heart is restless to find true rest. Our hearts will seek happiness. Maybe we think the perfect job or the perfect spouse will bring us happiness. Maybe surrounding ourselves with the best toys and products will bring us ultimate joy. But Augustine

is right. The human heart won't find its truest, happiest final rest until it rests in God, because we are made for God. 'You have made us for yourself,' Augustine says. We are created with a definite purpose in mind; that purpose is to find ourselves completely in God.

That's why Jesus tells stories about leaving home and returning home. The parable of a young son, so restless, so much yearning to see the world and find himself until one day he wakes up and realizes he is so far from home, so far from himself he begins a journey back. "Lord, I feel so broke up, I wanna go home." He is welcomed home with outstretched arms by a loving father whose heart yearned for his son's return. This is our story, the human story. We grow restless. We wander. We leave the home God lovingly creates for us. But there is always great rejoicing when we realize we are so broke up and we return to the loving embrace of a Father who lays his arms around us and welcomes us back.

Jesus says he is the Way, the Truth and Life. He is the way home, to the arms of the loving Father. Early followers of Jesus were simply known as followers of the Way. That's what the movement was called. The Way. Pretty simple isn't it? Only later did certain detractors insult them by calling them Christians. But in these earliest days they are followers of The Way. Now this is rather interesting in my mind. We have two different images that may seem somewhat at odds with one another. On the one hand we speak about home. Home implies arrival. Like the goal of baseball is to be safe at home. But we are also people of the Way. Being on the way implies travelling on a journey with our destination always ahead of us, still to be reached, a goal at the end. Are these images really at odds with one another?

Jesus tells us he goes ahead to prepare a place for us. The prepared place will be that home, that resting place in which we dwell with God. But we mustn't allow ourselves to think in physical terms. A home isn't really a building. A home is relationships. Families can move from house to house, but the home remains the same. Jesus is telling us our true home is in relationship with him and with the Father and dwelling with the Holy Spirit. At the heart of the triune life of God is the inter-personal relationship of the Son with his Father and their mutual Spirit of love and life. Here, in God, is where we find our home.

Home life, though, is never static but always dynamic. Sometimes we create in our minds an image of home based solely on nostalgia. A place where the recipe for Thanksgiving dinner never changes, where the lights are always hung at Christmas the exact same way year after year, where uncle George can always be counted on for having an extra glass of wine and regale us with the same story told again and again. But that's not really what our homes are like. Relationships change and grow, love deepens or grows cold. Hurts will fester and sacrifices made. Homes, like all of life, are always on a journey, always on a way. Hopefully the way is towards deeper love. But we all know that isn't always true. Sometimes the way is hurtful and destructive as well as life-affirming and helpful.

God is both home and way. Jesus is both our destination and our companion on the paths we take. The future is ahead of us, but the end comes to us through promise because Jesus lives. That means we can experience a foretaste of this destination even now, here in the present. We are home and we are going home. When we gather together to share this meal, Jesus is here, both welcoming us home and calling us to that home which still awaits us in its fullness. Whenever anyone is invited to share, to come and see and experience the love of God, we are home. Whenever the brokenhearted are comforted and all God's children are welcomed at his table, we are home.

Lord, I feel so broke up, I wanna go home. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. Amen.