

“HOME IS WHERE WE MEET”

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 December 10, 2017

*Play beginning of Elvis singing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”...* I’ll be home for Christmas has always been one of my favorite Christmas songs because the Christmas holiday anywhere but home is unthinkable for me. This year several weeks ago I asked George how he would feel about having Christmas in Pine Bluffs this year. I was thinking about a very hectic Christmas schedule for the month of December and driving to Lakewood early Christmas morning (as I have done for the past few years). George, as always, was very supportive and agreed that we could have our family Christmas here in Pine this year. It will be the first time in decades that we have not been home in Lakewood on Christmas. One of the reasons this will work is for me is that Pine is also my home. I really look forward to getting up on Christmas morning and not having to drive anywhere! I can stay in my pajamas all day if the mood strikes me!

As a child I celebrated Christmas with my own family and then with my mother’s side of her extended family. In the early years as a young family we would return to Colorado to spend Christmas with our parents. As adults we gradually began making our own Christmas traditions with Christmas observed in different cities and states but we were “home” with our nuclear family. My mother was always a huge part of the Christmas festivities after we returned to Colorado. The first Christmas after she passed away a dear friend gave me an ornament that stated something like “Miss me but let me go. I’m spending Christmas with Jesus this year.” I was comforted by that thought but it was still lonely because I did miss her so much.

A very different holiday celebration is shared by Rev. Dawn Chesser: As both a pastor and a pastor’s daughter and granddaughter, Christmas for me has

never been about “coming home,” especially if, by those words, one means returning to one’s roots, one’s home of origin. My mother grew up in a parsonage. I grew up in a parsonage. I raised my sons in parsonages and rental properties. Although my parents have now lived in their current house, which they own, for more than a decade, it was never my home. As a family, we have no “home.”

Furthermore, even if we did have a family home, we were not a family that was ever able to get together with the extended relatives for Christmas. My dad worked on Christmas Eve, so when I was growing up, our family couldn’t travel to see grandparents and relatives at Christmastime. I’ve worked for the church since I was twenty-one, and so I, too, have always worked on Christmas Eve. I have never been able to visit family over the Christmas holidays. As a single mother raising two children, for many years, I also had to navigate the challenging road of helping my sons have ample time with both their father and with me over the holidays. Because we had to be flexible each year, as a family, we never developed many hard Christmas traditions.

Nowadays, with our parents aging and our adult children living far away, it is rare for Scot and me to spend Christmas with family. We do sometimes make the trip back to Arkansas to see our parents, but when we do, we usually travel either the week before or the week after Christmas, so that we can be in our own community and home for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Pastors and their families spend a lifetime building relationships with their church members, but trying not to get too attached because we could be moved. Every year, when appointment season rolls around, we contemplate the possibility of uprooting our lives once more, saying goodbye to the relationships we’ve established, the people we have grown to love, and the plans we have put in

motion, and moving on to the next place God is calling us to serve. Sometimes the news that we are staying on comes as relief. Other times, it comes as difficult news. But the fact is, as people committed to itinerancy, we are never full members of the communities we serve. We are always outsiders, even if we serve in an appointment for a long time. So, in some ways, I think it is difficult for us, as people committed to itinerancy, to fully appreciate the holiday traditions of the people we serve.

In my case, I have experienced aspects of this as both laity and clergy. Remembering times when I saw one beloved pastor leave and another arrive that I didn't know a thing about, I doubted I'd like the new one as well as the old. And yet sometimes I did! It was still hard to have them come and go, even knowing that this is part of the United Methodist system. When the time comes it will be difficult to leave all of you that have become part of my life and my heart. But I just turned my papers in and hopefully I will be with you for another year.

No matter what the circumstances of our holidays, no matter how shallow and flexible, or deeply entrenched are our particular rituals and traditions, the holidays force us to confront ourselves, our relationships, and our lives in ways that the rest of the year does not insist upon. It is around the tree, around the fireplace, and around the table, that we find ourselves hurled back in time, immersed in emotions and behaviors that no longer define us. We become the child, the sister, the brother, the aunt, the uncle, the grandparent, the in-law, not only of the present, but of all our memories, both individual, and collective.

In some families, when we "come down home" to visit, our whole selves are not welcome. We come home harboring bad feelings, unresolved conflicts, disagreements about identity, politics, religious beliefs, lifestyle choices,

or other practices that must be hidden from family members. For many, the pressure to conform to the accepted family storyline is so great that the annual return becomes a thing to dread. Some refuse to participate. Others make family in different ways, as they create community with people with whom they have no blood ties, but who are, nevertheless, family.

In the past week I have officiated at two Celebration of Life services. Each was for a very special lady—my friend of over 30 years, Betty Ferraro, and Carole Wisroth’s service yesterday, a member of this Family of Faith for many years. One of the scriptures for Carole’s service was John 14:1-7 that speaks of Jesus preparing our new home: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...” I shared in the homily these observations: These opening words of chapter 14 are particularly meaningful and reassuring, because here Jesus talks about death as the journey home and about our life beyond death as life in our new home. The trip home may be easy or rough, untimely or timed with divine grace. For Christians, however, there can be no doubt about the destination. If you are a child of God by adoption through Jesus Christ, you may look forward to sharing his risen life with him in the presence of His Father, who is also your Father. Beyond, there is life—in the Father’s house...our new home.

What is it to come home? What is home? It’s different for each of us. Some find home with their blood relatives and long, established traditions. Some find home with the person they love the most. Patients in long-term care may be in a place and time where home exists only in deep corridors of their memories.

In the midst of all the destruction around the globe right now—destruction from hurricanes, typhoons, earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, droughts, and wars—

finding a place to call home may seem more distant, and yet more critical, than ever before. As I've been watching the news on the southern California fires, my heart goes out to those many families who are facing the coming holidays with no home and grieving all of their losses.

In last week's Scripture lesson from Isaiah, God had turned away from God's people because of their sinfulness. The people felt alone and filled with regret. They needed a sign, some kind of reassurance that God had not abandoned them forever. They needed to come home to their God.

This week, God has turned back toward God's people. God has restored the fortunes of Jacob. God has been merciful and offered pardon for sin. God has spoken peace to the faithful, to those who turn to the Lord in their hearts. In other words, God has returned to be at home among mortals.

What is home? Perhaps home is simply wherever we meet. It is where we attend to the intersections, the various paths where our lives come in contact with the lives of others and with our Lord God. According to the Psalmist, home is where steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. It is the place where righteousness and peace will kiss each other. It is the place where faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky.

Home is where we meet.

Home is anywhere we meet God, face-to face and hand-in-hand. Home is the assurance that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, thus proving God's love for us. Home is knowing that we are saved by the grace of God. Home is anywhere that we meet God's people and welcome them in with the love of Christ. Amen and amen.