

The Eighth Sunday Cycle A Matthew 6

“Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly father feeds them...” Consider the lilies of the field, ...O weak of faith! Stop worrying, then, over questions like what are we to eat, or drink or wear...”

When I hear that passage I generally want to argue, not only for myself but for the whole worried world. “Yes, but...” That’s what I want to say. “Yes, that’s a lovely passage and I really do believe it on some level, but birds don’t have bills to pay and lilies do not get arrested for loitering and the grass of the field does not have three children under five to feed and diaper. Yes, God will provide, but meanwhile there are people sleeping between cardboard sheets and eating out of trash cans who seem to have fallen between the cracks of this passage.” Do not worry? I do worry. About the growing number of people in this land of ours who have no place to call home, about the growing revolution that must take place before that trend will reverse itself, and about how I can know all of that and still enjoy my own home, which is important to me.

Home is more than just a residence. For me it is a sanctuary. It is the place where I rest, where I retire beyond the reach of the noisy world, where I am fed. It’s where my bed is, and my books and all the photographs of my relatives and ancestors. It’s where I invite my friends and cook for them. It’s where I write and compose and paint and pray. My home is a promise I make to myself when I get too tired to go on. “You can go home soon,” I tell myself and the knowledge spreads through me like sun on a cold day so that I can go on, for a little longer at least. Not so long ago I acted on that promise, leaving the church a little after dark after a long, hard day. Looking out into the parking lot I saw Charles one of the homeless who sometimes hangs around. He spends his days walking around this part of town and sleeps under one of the bridges and he loves this church. He cried out “Good evening father, holding up the paper sack wrapped around a bottle the contents he had just finished.” I responded: “Good evening Charles.” I asked him how he was and I got the full answer, none of which made any sense. When I had about enough of his incoherent ramblings I said: “Well, I’ve got to go home now.” No sooner had I said it than I regretted it. What a thing to say to someone who didn’t have one! What an excuse to use with him. The word hung between us for a moment until he brushed it aside, “This is my home,” he said waving his arm toward the church building. “This is the only home I have.” Home, What a compelling, elusive word that is. What a strong hunger the human heart has for home, and what a hard thing it is to find and keep a home...not just a building, but a place to belong... a place to be from a and place to go to: a safe place from which to know the world, a stable fortress in an often frightening universe.

Some of us have had many homes growing up and some of us only a few or one. For me I remember home was more than just a brick and mortar structure.

It was an address on a street, a telephone number I memorized. It was an identity within the community. There are folks who grow up with plenty of houses but no clear sense of home. And it’s not necessary to move a lot to lose track of home these days. Just ask residents of east Austin who are being taxed out their homes every day in the name of gentrification or for the sake of accommodating the latest requirements of hipsters and

those who must live in the proximity of downtown. You can stay put right where you are and still feel the ground shift under your feet. The neighbourhood where you lived all your life begins to change complexion; property values go way up or way down.

Where did home go? The marriage breaks up and the children become commuters, living part time with each parent. Where did home go? Or your parents die and the house you grew up in is taken apart piece by piece. Where did home go? For as long as God's people can remember, they have been seeking the way home. "A wandering Aramean was my father..." That's how the story of Israel begins in the Book of Deuteronomy, and that is the story every Hebrew learned to repeat when presenting the first fruits to the Lord. However settled God's people became, however prosperous they became in the promised land, they were not to forget the long roundabout journey by which they had been delivered there. Wanderers once, they would be wanderers again, but wherever they went they were to remember: their destiny was never Egypt or Jerusalem or Babylon but God, always God.

Thousands of years later, Jesus would appear, a messiah with a house but no home. Foxes have lairs, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," he says in the 9th chapter of Luke. It's not a complaint; it's the truth. If God is where we came from and God is where we are going, then we have no permanent address and all our shelters along the way are temporary ones. Our houses, our church buildings, the places we work, are all good places to park ourselves and rest a little while, but they are not good places to define ourselves by, or sustain ourselves with, because they don't have that kind of power.

On any given night, however comfortable we may be and however secure our futures may seem, we remain vulnerable to a certain heaviness of heart that can come upon us for no apparent reason at all. It may begin as a flutter in the chest or as a full blown ache...a sudden hollowness inside, a peculiar melancholy, an inexplicable homesickness. Have you felt it? The sense that there is a place you belong that you have somehow gotten separated from, a place that misses you as much as you miss it and that is calling you to return, only you are not there yet, and that your life will not be complete until you are there.

It's not the best feeling in the world, but it isn't the worst either. It's not a bad thing to know you belong somewhere, even if you aren't there yet. I like to think of it as a homing instinct placed inside of us at baptism...that nags us, and turns us around, and makes us restless when we sit still too long, because none of us is home yet. Some of us have houses and some of us don't; all of us stake out various places to be for days months or years, but none of us is home yet. A wandering Aramean was our father; our Lord had nowhere to lay his head. We have loved him without having seen him, as St. Peter wrote two thousand years ago, and it's truer now than it was then. We have loved him without having seen him, but we mean to see him.

We track him, following his foot prints out of this place to wherever life takes us each week...our houses, our work, our schools, our play. We track him to all the places where people stand in long lines with dirty folded pieces of paper in their hands, all the places they bend over lengthy application forms with ballpoint pens that don't work. We track him in their faces, which are surprising in their variety. We look for him in the veteran, the

panhandler at the intersection, the widow, the immigrant, the young mother with the crowd of children around her legs. We follow him by following them home, or following them into all the places they live that are not home for them. When we join them there, it dawns on us that the body of Christ is fundamentally homeless...as strange as it sounds, the only reason he can make his home anywhere is that he calls no place home...and we who belong to his body are as footloose as our Lord. What that means for the church is that homelessness is not an "issue" for us that we attend to merely out of social conscience; it is our primary identity, and when we forget that we forget who we are and whom we follow. We also, think, forget how to serve. Ignoring the truth about ourselves, we cling to certain illusions that foul us up and wear us down, turning our service of God into a panicky duel with our own devils.

We cling to the illusion that some of us are blessed and some of us aren't, and that it is our job as those who are blessed to rescue those who aren't. We labor under the illusion that our work involves "us" and "them." With us, the caregivers, the helpers, the lucky.., on one side of the counter and them...the clients, the supplicants, the unlucky...on the other side. We succumb to the illusion that they can all be saved if only we will work enough hours, find enough money and get enough publicity. We may also cling to our own comforts, more aware that ever how much they matter to us, and we may try to cut deals with God: that if we are allowed to keep what we have then we will double our efforts on behalf of those who have less than we do. Meanwhile we can hardly enjoy what we do have for all the guilt it provokes in us. Shall we cut our own rations to bread and water? Wear sackcloth to work? What shall we do?

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" That's what we shall do. When we forget who we are, our Lord reminds us: we are the people who live by the grace of God alone, by trusting in God's providence and by remembering that we are more, far more than what we consume or wear or where we live. We may care for ourselves and we may care for others, but it is God who cares for all of us, and none of us is home yet.

If we remember that, our service to others will be as different as our sense of ourselves. There is no "us" or "them" out there, just us...all of us...lined up on the same side of God's counter. Some of us have more than the others, but we are all blessed, all called to bless one another, all seeking and finding it in one another's company. We don't have to wear ourselves out protecting ourselves from the truth...that none of us is home yet, that home is hard to find, that our longing for home is deep and abiding and often very painful. We don't have to use up all our energy running from it, or running from those who remind us of it. We can instead choose to serve those among us who are closest to that truth, who live out our homelessness for us in very literal, concrete ways. We can join them in their search for a home, understanding that their search is our own search. We can serve the God who feeds and clothes and shelters by doing some of that ourselves, but always with the knowledge that it is God who provides...or rather who is our true and

only home, in whose household there is plenty...for the birds of the air, for the lilies of the field, and every one of us.

May we pray?

Our Father in heaven, we are reminded today that we are homeless until we find our home in you. Only in you is our soul at rest. Aid us in our struggle to trust in you for all things so that we may be free to do your will and gladly let tomorrow take care of itself. We ask this through Jesus Christ who is Lord for ever and ever. Amen