

YOU'RE MY HOME

John 14.1-3

September 10, 2017, Homecoming (*Living our Values*)

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

The choir has just demonstrated this value we are trying to live out in our life together of being “present to one another and our neighbors.”

Let me say a word about how this set of values came to be. As we saw how things have been developing in our nation and in the world, the leaders of the church commissioned a group to write an Affirmation of Values that would clearly express some of what matters to us. Thanks to the writers - Mark Jensen, Phil Mortenson, Sami Hoag, Jeanne Dorn, Sandra Jones, and Darla O'Brian – we have this prologue and a set of six values.

If you turn to the beginning of the bulletin you will see a paragraph this is a kind of prologue. I will read that section and then invite you to join me in reading that first value, “we will be present to one another ...”

Seattle First Baptist Church: *Living our Values*

Faithful to our Baptist heritage, we strive for a world where people are welcomed regardless of, and with respect for, their religious beliefs; where the separation of church and state is vigorously defended; where freedom is a fundamental right that values the dignity of all persons without regard to their race, country of birth, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, or disabilities; and where compassion is the measure of our actions.

We will be present to one another and our neighbors in our personal relationships and by creating venues for engagement where we can learn about viewpoints different from our own.

Each week for six weeks, we will be focusing on one of those values. And, on this Homecoming Sunday, it seems fitting to be working on what it means to be “present to one another and our neighbors.”

And, in fact, I find this helpful this morning because as much as “home” is a powerful emotional and spiritual metaphor for me – and I think for us here at Seattle First Baptist Church – it’s pretty difficult to talk about home in anything less than very literal terms these last few days.

You have seen the pictures of long lines of cars as people are leaving their homes and the devastating pictures of people who have lost their homes to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

You have also heard the stories of young people who thought this country *was* their home – many of whom don’t know any other place as home – who fear now that the promise of home was a lie, who fear being deported to places they have barely or never known.

For millions of people today, “home” isn’t just a metaphor or an idea or a dream. It’s a literal place. And it’s a nightmare.

So, on this Homecoming Sunday, being present to those who are losing their homes seems like the right thing to do.

For some reason, in the middle of all this, I keep hearing the singer, Billy Joel, in the back of my head. And I’m thinking of one of his songs in particular:

*When you look into my eyes
And you see the crazy gypsy in my soul
It always comes as a surprise
When I feel my withered roots begin to grow*

*Well I never had a place that I could call my very own
That's all right, my love, 'cause you're my home*

*Home can be the Pennsylvania Turnpike
Indiana's early morning dew
High up in the hills of California
Home is just another word for you*

*I'll never be a stranger and I'll never be alone
Wherever we're together, that's my home*

I need you in my house 'cause you're my home

All I can say on this Homecoming morning is that I need you in *this* house 'cause you're my home. I get disoriented and lost sometimes. I lose hope. I feel like a stranger in my own country and sometimes in my own skin. And I feel alone.

It is in being present to one another that those “withered roots begin to grow” and I begin to find myself again. Like the song says, “wherever we're together, that's my home.”

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that place doesn't matter. Just ask the folks in Texas and Florida. It does. If you are dis-placed physically or culturally or spiritually, having a place can be life-saving.

One of the women they interviewed in Florida last night said: “We don't have any place to go.”

I've told the story before about finding myself one night in Chicago several years ago being beat up in a parking by someone who was supposed to love me. And the shocking thing was not just the violence of that moment but the realization that I had no place to go. I lived at the Y for a few days until a friend at work figured out what was going on and made a place for me. And it changed my life.

Place matters.

Perhaps “home” is such a powerful thing because it is at the intersection of place and presence.

And we know that connection is powerful because sometimes “home” is the place where we are acutely aware of the presence of an absence.

Perhaps in other places we don't notice. Perhaps in other places there is enough distraction. But at home there can be the visceral presence of an absence.

I visited my hometown this summer and on Sunday, my sister and I snuck into the back the church my dad pastored for over 40 years. It was incredibly more emotional than I had imagined. My dad died about eight years ago, right before I came here to Seattle First Baptist Church. And, of course, I think about my dad. Of course, I remember him. But, in *that* place, I became very aware of the presence of his absence in my life. There is an emptiness present in me that I don't feel as deeply in any other place.

The intersection of place and presence is where we find the text for this morning from John 14. Jesus is preparing his friends for his absence as the days march toward the end of his life. And he says: "Don't let your hearts be troubled ... I go to prepare a place for you that where I am, you may be also."

Now I know that we often use this passage in memorial services. We imagine it as a promise for the future – for another world.

But I am reminded that the gospel of John begins with those mysterious words: "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us and we beheld its glory, full of grace and truth."

This word has already been taking on flesh among us so that we get to see something – a little glimpse somehow – of the glory and the grace and the truth of a promise at the intersection of place and presence.

Place matters. "I go to prepare a place for you," Jesus says.

This place where we are sitting right now has been prepared for us. It's a place prepared for us by our ancestors who ordained the first woman, May Jones, in 1869.

It's a place prepared for us by our ancestors who stood with Chinese immigrants and against the internment of Japanese sisters and brothers.

It's a place prepared for us by our ancestors who had a vision for housing low-income seniors at another place, Hilltop House.

It's a place prepared for us by our ancestors who have been marrying same-sex couples for almost 40 years and who made a home for Diverse Harmony, the country's first queer-straight youth chorus.

It's a place prepared for us by our ancestor, Charles Z. Smith who did his best to break down the barriers of race and class.

This place has been prepared for *us*. And by preparing this place, even in their absence, those beloved ones are still present with us.

And sometimes just being present creates a place. There's the wisdom of Billy Joel again:

If I travel all my life

And I never get to stop and settle down

Long as I have you by my side

There's a roof above and good walls all around ...

Sometimes presence creates a place.

So what kind of place do we want our presence to be creating?

That's the question this value is asking of us.

Are we creating a place where we can be present to ourselves? It seems like there are precious few places that can slow us down and bring us face to face with ourselves, places that can ask us the really deep questions about what matters.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh says:

Your true home is in the here and now. It is not limited by time, space, nationality, or race. Your true home is not an abstract idea; it is something you can touch and live in every moment ... you can find your true home in the full relaxation of your mind and body in this present moment ... mindfulness ... is the energy of your true presence.

You know, we have so much work to do. So many places to be. So many causes to support.

Along with all that, are we creating places where we can be present to ourselves in mindfulness and meditation, in reflection and rest?

There is so much to draw us out into the world right now that I worry we will lose touch with our hearts and our souls and what really matters to us. And someday that aching absence – that gnawing emptiness – will overwhelm us so that we just give up on the world and on ourselves.

Because that's the point, really. Creating places where we can be present to ourselves is about having the capacity to be present to one another and our neighbors.

And then the question is: Are we the kind of place where people show up for each other? That's clearly what our ancestors did. They showed up for broken and the hated and the rejected and the threatened. They showed up for one another. They showed up for people who needed a place – a home.

That's why it's so important that we sing this hymn every Homecoming. I hope it never becomes cliché because it's a pledge we are making that we will show up to this place that has been prepared for us.

This is the place that made a home for a young man who was rejected by his family.

This is the place that showed up for that young man when he was dying of AIDS.

This is the place that held his parents when they realized that it was too late to reconcile with their son.

This is the place that didn't give up on the son.

This is the place that didn't give up on his parents.

This is the place where we have been taught to sing: "Bring your scattered people home."

Because this is the place that remembers: Wherever we're together, that's our home.

At the intersection of place and presence is this voice singing out: "Bring your scattered people home."

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Thich Nhat Hanh has written a daily meditation book, *Your True Home* (Shambhala, 2011). The quotes here are from selections 1 and 2.