

“In The House There is a Home”

John 14:1-14

During this past week among my family a lot of conversation centered on where we would meet or catch up with each other. It wasn't that long ago we would say let's meet at Mom's, or Grandma's. This past week it was more about meeting at "the house". "Come back to the house and eat." "Let's meet at the house in the morning." Even the funeral director offered to drop off the guest book and related items at "the house". It was our central gathering place for the 32 of us. There haven't been that many people in that house for years, in fact maybe never that many at once. We took some time to go down memory lane every now and then recalling how four kids and two adults grew up in that small house with only one bathroom. What was my brother and my bedroom is probably against code these days being as small as it is. My nieces and nephews all have personal rooms much bigger. The driveway was filled with cars and many more were parked along the road, or even up on the lawn. It was indeed a full house. It seemed to me that we all avoided calling it anything other than "the house" because when my mother died earlier in the week the house lost a resident that made it more than just a building. The first time into the house after her death was difficult for all of us. The younger ones were quicker to say what we older ones were thinking. It was sad with a feeling of loneliness that someone who had lived there in her home for over 55 years was no longer present. Perhaps said in her honor we did not call it home. The person who had made it a place of warmth and love, laughter and joy was no longer bodily present. Even while her memory and spirit seemed alive and well while we reminisced about her, we still felt a chill because someone who always greeted you with a hug and smile was no longer waiting at the door. A home is more than a house or a place. A home is where the heart is, where love is shared, where people feel welcomed and accepted, where people greet one another and care for each other. A home is where people grow in loving and trusting, forgiving and helping, that makes the house big enough for everyone to find a place in it.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said. In my Father’s house are many rooms, or dwelling places, he continued. As with all of us when we lose a loved one, we hold on to hope that one day we will be together again. God brings us a virtual reminder of our being together again by using the imagery of a house that becomes a home for many to dwell within. It may be our desire to ask if this is a house like we know one on earth, or if it is in heaven, and then where is heaven? We might ask if we will know one another like we have known each other here, and many more questions we could ask about this place that God prepares for us. But those questions are not necessarily answered for us. But what is answered is that God promises us that what we experience here in this life with friends and families is a vision of what we will enjoy in life everlasting. God makes a house for us that will be roomy enough for all of us. God gives us the promise that the best of what we enjoyed here on earth with our most loved ones will continue for us in heaven. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are assured that we will be united again in the warmth and love, joy and peace that so often we experienced in this life. But God gives us the certainty that it will be forever, and we will be redeemed and renewed for love eternal with one another.

Who hasn’t been comforted with these words of Jesus recorded in John? We will be with Christ and all of his forgiven lambs and sheep, his flock and people. In believing in God, we have the picture of life everlasting painted for us. It is God’s call for who will be there. It is his nature to be forgiving and kind, and it was very evident for the whole world in the death and resurrection of his Son. There is room, and a place already reserved for those of us who believe in him, and for those for whom the mercy of Christ excels our merit and worth. It is a big house and God will make it a full house because of his overwhelming kindness and compassion for all who long and yearn to be together with those they loved here on earth. In believing that, then we already are moved to remember that the Church is Christ’s Church, and within the walls, and in the gathering of his redeemed saints, already we find a home. Jesus calls all who look for hope and joy, peace and comfort, promise and certainty that they are loved and forgiven, welcomed and accepted. In the Church at its best, there already is a sign of what heaven is like. It is more than a house. It is a home for all.

I suppose we have an image of heaven's house printed in our minds. Some religious groups picture heaven like a huge Hilton Hotel. Then they believe they will be in the Penthouse suites of the Heavenly Hilton. (I won't mention which groups think this!) Yet, we smile, we sometimes believe that some are entitled to better views or service in heaven. We look at it as some kind of a reward system, being awarded points for better perks. Too often we have in our minds who will not be there, or should not be there, or we hope will not be there. And there are people, maybe even with us now, who begin to wonder if they will ever be worthy of receiving a room in heaven's house. In reviewing our lives we may think ourselves unworthy, or unforgiven, or skipped over. How many people have never heard about God's forgiving love? And how many keep believing they are not worthy or entitled to mercy?

If someone believes they are not welcomed to heaven, then something has happened to cause that thought to trouble them. Seldom is the church's message of forgiveness and salvation heard. The Church though can be rather vocal about who can't get in, or who is not worthy, or who is the sinner, or the sin unforgivable. If that is said about heaven, then certainly it is said about the church on earth. The church becomes a place or a house where only selected people are welcomed. The house becomes too small and the hearts of the people shrink as well. We think anyone who doesn't believe in God like we believe in God is immediately on the outside looking in. And in this day of living among others of so many different faiths, we wrestle even more with who is invited into heaven. Then, we may be more about keeping out the unwelcomed than welcoming in those who seek a relationship with God.

Why is it that we are at times so worried about who might get into God's eternal home? I'm wondering if it is a matter of faith. We are quick to think we know everything there is to know about God, but one thing we keep working at knowing better is how wide and deep his mercy. Our faith struggles with God's mercy and grace because often we are struggling with those things ourselves. Jesus assures us one thing. If you believe in God and in him, there is a room reserved for you. We have comfort knowing that today. But we all know some who do not believe in God, and some of those people may be close to us. We

may not be sure if they will be with us forever. Besides being a positive witness of the faith to them, we also hold on to our trust in God's love for them. That same love surrounds this whole world. And only God can for sure declare who is not welcomed. In Jesus, the way to heaven is made known. In Jesus the forgiven are welcomed. Only in our trust and faith in him are we accepted as well.

So, today think about this place. It is a structure and building, a house. One is very new, at least one end of it, and the other building is quite old. If they remain only houses and buildings, then there will be lots of room for more people. Unfortunately, more people might not be invited or welcomed if it is only a house. But if it is a home, then things may get crowded at times. Let's hope that's true. My mother would have rejoiced this past week with all of her family crowded together in her house. Don't we rejoice when there are lots of people with us? Especially joyful is the love shared and experienced among one another. It is delightful seeing different people with different names and looks, and colors and ancestry. It is a sign of heaven on earth. We exist to welcome more to know and believe in God promising them that there is a place reserved for us where all the best of this life that is temporal and temporary, will be eternal and forever. When we gather as God's people in his place, it is a home where love dwells, forgiveness exists, new life begins, strangers become friends, the community and family expands, and hope and promise sustain. When we witness Jesus, then we are not bothered by who is not invited or welcomed, or can't get into heaven. No, our energies go to welcoming and assuring people that they are loved, and we will do our best to let everyone know that in this place is a taste of heaven already. Jesus died for all of us that all of us will be offered the life that never ends filled with light and love. His death and resurrection is the core of why we exist. We make room now for those who are also promised a room forever in heaven. Alleluia. Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**