

“Heir B&B”

Sermon, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Have you ever been homesick for a place you have never visited? I think of the song in *Les Miserables* sung by the orphaned child Cosette: “There is a castle on a cloud; I like to go there in my sleep. Aren’t any floors for me to sweep, not in my castle on a cloud.” In First Peter, we see a letter that goes out to Christian exiles in five places: Pontus, Galatea, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythania. Because it speaks of believers in Jesus as being in exile, we can guess they were suffering some kind of persecution under Roman governance. The writer of this letter, which was passed along Christian communities in what is modern day Turkey, speaks to what it is like to live as aliens, to feel as if they are rejected stones, to be exiles among a people who do not see your value. The author wrote to a people who were homesick for a place they did not yet have: a place of welcome, and of acceptance, a place where they could plant roots and watch their faith in Jesus grow.

To these people, Peter’s epistle gives a promise: “the stone that the builders rejected becomes the very head of the corner.” Jesus may have been rejected by those around them. Even his followers have been rejected by those around him; not only that, this epistle speaks of them being beaten and abused. It is to these people that the author promises: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

Perhaps these early followers of Jesus longed for the place about which Jesus spoke in John's gospel: "In my father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you?" These followers of Jesus, living under persecution as they created the early blueprints for the Christian church probably wished for some kind of holy mansion, under God's care, safe and secure, where they could practice their faith peacefully together.

Have any of you tried Air B&B before? We have used it several times, and when we lived in Chicago we rented our home out a couple of times-- once, coincidentally, we rented out to a Presbyterian pastor in town to visit family. We have an upcoming vacation to Hilton Head with my dad and all my siblings and their families in June. My sister Alice and I spent hours poring over sites like Air B&B and VRBO to try to find the perfect combo of affordability, comfort, style, and proximity to the beach. We searched for this perfect home with a homesickness for a place we have never visited. We tried to imagine qualities that would delight each member of our quirky family-- and felt a lot of pressure doing so, since this is the first vacation all my adult siblings will take together with our dad and, unlike when we were young children, no one wants to sleep on a mat on the floor. I recognized our search is probably more than about the actual house; to us, the house symbolizes a unity we long for in our family that is spread out in four states.

Peter's letter promises something even better than the perfect Air B&B booking. He promises that the perfect house is not something that is outside of us. Rather, he calls us to become the house of God's promise: "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Instead of looking for that castle on a cloud, we can *become* those holy dwelling places where Jesus can reside.

We are heirs to what Jesus offers. (Heir as in receiving an inheritance, not as in air we breathe). In our belief, we become his body. In our belonging,

we share his blood. And as heirs, we will also be fed. Peter instructs us, “like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” If you know me, you know I do not only think of God as Father, but also as Mother. I like to think of God as a mother who nurses us her beloved children with this spiritual milk of which Peter speaks, making us grow to strength in faith and belonging.

I was around a nursing mother these past 2 days. “Is he your only child?” My heart broke a little when I heard a guest at my graduation picnic yesterday ask this of Stacy, our former babysitter in Chicago, as she held and nursed her 6 week old infant son. Stacy had watched my daughter Kai ever since I returned to my work as a minister after my 3 month maternity leave. Even after a year in New Jersey, my daughter still will sometimes cry for Stacy when she is hurt or sad. Stacy has a gift and a calling with children, so it was an especially harsh irony when her first child came too early, born at 22 weeks and unable to survive. We were so happy when she became pregnant a second time, but this child was lost too when she went into labor at 19 weeks. I was reminded of Naomi in the bible, who-- after her two sons and husband died, changed her name from *Naomi*, which means pleasant, to *Mara*, which means bitterness. But Stacy came back to work, at first avoiding the places she knew where she would run into women who have newborn babies-- which, when you are struggling with infertility or pregnancy loss, seem to be everywhere. After we left Chicago, and just before her husband in the National Guard shipped off to Afghanistan, Stacy found herself pregnant again. This time it was a wonderfully ordinary, full-term pregnancy, with a healthy baby and a husband who got special permission to return from Afghanistan to hold his wife’s hand and then his son’s tiny, wailing body.

So as you can imagine, I was giddy to see Stacy these past days and to welcome her son, Hudson. He looks just like her! But when my guest asked Stacy if this baby was her only child, I silently held her grief with her as she chose not to give the full story but only answered “yes.” As much as

Mothers' Day calls forth our appreciation and fondness for mothers, for some it can be a complex day, as it reminds them of loss, of grief, or of missed opportunities.

I graduated from my Doctor of Ministry Program on Friday. My studies focused on pastoral care. More specifically I did research on adoptive families, since my former church had a large number of them. I was in search of practices and considerations the church could offer, that were unique from the resources in the schools and mental health community, for adopted teenagers as they emerge into adulthood and sort through their own sense of identity. Identity formation is a challenging process for any adolescent. But for adoptees, I was finding, there are added layers, and they have a spiritual component. Adoptees grapple with the circumstances of their adoption and the loss around it. They may struggle to accept that they are implicitly loved and belong. For those in so many of our families with interracial adoptions-- growing up in families with a racial identity that did not match how people outside the family saw and treated them was especially challenging. With society around them giving these kids the narrative that they "should feel so *lucky* that they were adopted by such a great family, and taken out of whatever devastating situation that led to their relinquishment," many kids do not feel there is any place to question, long for or grieve their beginnings. I interviewed one adult who had been adopted as a child from Korea, by white parents. He wrote a book about his own quest for identity. He says his internal racism was so strong that he always saw his Korean body as ugly-- until the day his wife-- who is Korean-- gave birth to their son. "I peered into his tiny face, and he opened his eyes and looked at me, and I thought to myself, 'You are so beautiful!'" Palmer then noted with tears, "It was the first time I realized a Korean body could be beautiful."

When we can come to recognize our own bodies as a dwelling place for God, we become beautiful. Jesus said "I go and prepare a place for you; I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you

may be also. The dwelling place Jesus tells us about is not in some heaven far, far away. It is here. It is here, and Jesus is here, even when we are living in exile, as foreigners in a strange land. It is here, and accessible in times of deepest sorrow, loss or grief. It is here, with a big welcome mat at the door where we can wipe off our feet-- or take off our shoes-- and come on inside to find holy ground. In this house there are many rooms. In this house we shall all be fed. Taste, taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.