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There's No Place Like Home

“Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.”

For most of us, fortunately, that familiar verse has a very pleasant ring to it. The very word “home”, for most of us is one of the warm fuzzies in life. If I were to ask you, “Where is your home?” some of you would immediately think of the place where you now live while others would reflect on the place where you grew up. Those whose present home life is chaotic and disturbed and those who are new to an area might feel a little “homeless” because home fortunately conveys a sense of belonging and warmth and security. Those whose home life is warm and loving will probably respond to that question by saying, “Home is where I am with my family.”

Home does have several meanings. It often refers to the place we come from. When someone asks me, “Where is your home?” and I suspect the person wants to know my place of origin, I will say, Andalusia, Alabama. And, still today, in a sense, Andalusia feels like “home” to me, even though most of the people I knew growing up there have moved away or died.

It is amazing how memories of home remain real and vivid. We can often bring up today sounds and smells from our childhood home. I can reminisce and bring to mind people and events and scenes and even household pets and wish that I could go back to that era at least for a brief visit. Just a few years ago, I was supplying the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church in Andalusia and the people who now live in the house where I grew up invited Sylvia and me to lunch there. As we wandered about the house that I had not been in for about fifty years, my mind went back to some wonderful memories. Fortunately, in my case, most of my memories of home are good and give me a warm, pleasant, and secure feeling.

Some people do not have warm, fuzzy feelings about their childhood home. Some never lived anywhere long enough to call any place home. Others came from disturbed families,

including many abusive, violent families and their memories of home are grim so that they try to block out of their memory images of their home of origin. And that is certainly sad to me.

Home is also where we now live. It is a house, to be sure, but it is more nearly “a particular place with particular people.” As Herbert Anderson has well said: “Home is a company of people with particular values and a particular history. It is with people with whom we have a special relationship and bonding: our spouse and children and occasionally, extended family members sharing the same house.” That arrangement changes. Like others, Sylvia and I were by ourselves at first. Then, there were children, and now they are gone, and we are by ourselves again. Sylvia and I have learned that we will be “at home” wherever we are together. That is what is meant when we say, “Home is where the heart is.”

On the secular calendar today is Mother’s Day. Though Mother’s day is not on the Christian calendar it does focus on home and that is what I would like to do in the sermon today. I was struck by some observations about the home in a book entitled, Leaving Home, by Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell. In the book Anderson describes several characteristics of home that I would like to pass on to you with additional comments.

Consider first, that a home involves a defined physical space. And a home physical space is better when the space is limited to one’s family and is even better when each individual has private space. Some years ago, Sylvia and I were in St. Petersburg, Russia, which is a city filled with state-owned high rise apartment buildings. Our guide told us that a lot of the apartments were being shared by several families, all using one kitchen and one bathroom. That cannot be healthy. The best you can say for that is that at least they were protected from the outside weather, which can be quite severe in the winter. Every person should have a physical space that can be called home. This is one of the reasons why homelessness is such a tragedy. A homeless person has no address and therefore, virtually no identity or privacy. And, of course, I believe that every person should have a decent physical space that can be called home. This is one of the reasons why Habitat for Humanity is such a wonderful thing. It is helping people be able to afford decent housing. Home is a physical space with personal mementos and experiences. Every person needs a livable physical space that he or she can call home.

Then too, home is a place of safety. Dr. Anderson says:

“It is a shelter, not only against the elements and injury, but from terror and doubt. It is a context that protects those most vulnerable---our children and our elderly. To be home is to be safe. Home is where we expect our needs to be met, where we expect to be taken care of, where we will be able to let down our guard and allow the more childlike or childish side of our personality to emerge. If I am hungry, I will be fed. If I am sick, I will be taken care of. If I am weary, there will be space and freedom to rest.”

Unfortunately, too many homes are not a place of safety. Sometimes the danger is from within, in the cases of child and spouse abuse and neglect and when the dominant atmosphere is one of conflict. Sometimes the danger is from without, in cases of crime. In some neighborhoods, crime is so rampant that no one feels safe in their own home. If you have ever been burglarized you know the feeling of being personally violated that that brings. And, of course, there are the traumatic times when homes are destroyed in storms.

Every person needs and deserves a home that is safe.

Further, Dr. Anderson says that home is where we belong. Belonging does have something to do with physical space, but it is primarily a feeling of being loved, wanted, needed and appreciated. In that sense, home can be in any location.

We experience this aspect of home in church all the time. We refer to our congregation as our church home or family or our faith community and crucial to that is a sense of belonging, of fitting in, of being loved, wanted, needed and appreciated. People sometimes leave a church because they don't feel at home there and people join a church because it feels like “home” to them. It is for that reason that we have to work at creating community by encouraging people to get in some small group and by being welcoming to all who come.

Moreover, home is a gift that we never earn. In Robert Frost's poem, “The Death of the Hired Man,” the farmer, Warren, says:

“Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” In that same poem, the farmer's wife has a slightly different view from her husband. She said, “I should have said it's something you somehow haven't to deserve.”

Home is the place where our acceptance is unconditional. We belong there by virtue of our very existence, by being born into the family. In the healthiest families, children are received and welcomed as gifts from God and acceptance and love are not based on good behavior or looks or success.

And yet, having said that, we need to go further and say that a home is a demanding place. Rules have to be in place and applied equally to all. Individual needs and desires often have to be set aside for the sake of the family. Everyone has to contribute something to the well-being of the home.

In that sense the home is a laboratory for Christian living. That is, God's love for us is unconditional and we are welcomed at birth to the world by God and the faith community. We do not have to earn our way in. But, having been given that grace, we have demands placed upon us for the good of the community. This is a rhythm in both the church and the home that can help make us more effective disciples of Jesus.

Finally, and most important, being at home with God transforms all other experiences of home.

At the heart of our faith is the belief that we are made in the image or likeness of God, that we are made to live in a relationship of love with God, and, therefore, our true "home" is in God. As Augustine so graphically put it, "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." That is precisely why when we are separated from God we are at loose ends and why conversion feels so much like a homecoming.

That is also why being at home with God transforms all other experiences of home. If our earthly home life is characterized by love, then being at home with God only enhances that. If our earthly home life is characterized by conflict, then being at home with God can be a haven or refuge in the midst of that. Garrison Keillor, that great storyteller, tells about having a "storm home" in his youth in Minnesota. Students who rode the busses in from outside the town were assigned a "storm home" in the town when they started high school so that they would have a place to go if a snow storm kept the buses from running. It so happens that it never stormed on a school day the entire time Garrison was there, but he was always grateful for the Kruegers, his

storm home family. He would imagine how they would welcome him and be delighted to see him and he felt supported by that promise.

Being at home with God is like that. It matters not how severe the storms of life are, if we are at home with God we feel safe and secure.

What all this comes down to for us is that Jesus Christ can make all the difference in our homes and I urge you to let him be not only a welcome guest, but the very foundation of your home. If you will do that he will bring love and joy and peace and grace and forgiveness to your home and motivate you to be involved in our society to make all homes a haven of peace and safety.