

“Many Mansions”

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1 Peter 2:1-10

John 14:1-17

[Jesus said,]

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places.’ John 14:1-2a

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be patient when we don’t know the whole situation
and how we fit in.

Help us to trust that you know what is going on
and that there is a place for us in your design.

Amen

‘The more things change, the more they stay the same’...
wouldn’t that be nice?

Instead we have a world that is constantly in flux...

Paradigm shifts! Sea changes! Climate change! Mass extinctions!

Clash of cultures! Wars of liberation! The Apocalypse!

These are all terms that bring to mind the transient upheavals of
history and the delicate balance of “our way of life”.

The world of the disciples was about to change that very night
when Jesus spoke to them at their Last Supper together
in that upper room,

‘Let not your hearts be troubled...’

Their lives would be thrown into chaos with the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus
and days later they would re-gather in that same upper room to hide.

Everyone needs a place to be – a place to retreat to and rest,
a refuge, a sanctuary, a place under the sun, a place to call your own.

It is true for both plants and animals that they must have
a place in the environment – or niche, to which they have adapted
in order to fit in and survive.

For life to exist on Earth, there is a narrow range of conditions of temperature,
exposure to the Sun, and available resources,
with very little tolerance for change
before a community is threatened with extinction.

This also involves the interdependence of other groups –
if one group is threatened in an eco-system, others will be affected, too.

Willard, p.2

Here's an example:

The flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina devastated the oyster fishing industry in the coastal region around New Orleans. Then there was last year's catastrophic Gulf oil spill which left only about 10% of the original oyster population there. This niche of oyster beds is now threatened by the flow of fresh waters flooding from Mississippi River into the Gulf. It is expected that the remainder will be wiped out, yet will be reconstituted from elsewhere within 5 years. The problem is that the oyster fishermen cannot remain in business that long, waiting for this to happen.

We are all in it together whether we like it or not and it is bad enough when there are natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods, but human beings have the capacity to devastate the environment by intention or neglect for the endangerment of us all.

Our Justice & Peace Committee showed a film here the other night on how wars affect the environment.

By nature, war is intended to deny habitable areas to one's enemy to prevent them from having a tagging area to make an attack or to have the resources of weapons and ammunition to fight.

Consequently, regions are blown up, defoliated, and deliberately poisoned to coerce an enemy into surrender.

But even after direct hostilities cease, there are ongoing consequences from unexploded bombs, deteriorating stockpiles of chemical weapons and sunken oil transports, as well as land mines strewn about and forgotten that turn land and sea into a wasteland.

And of course, nuclear weapons with their byproducts pose the greatest and longest-lasting threat.

And then there is the broader problem of simply mismanaging land used for agriculture and mining as well as the sea for overfishing and the improper disposal of pollution.

Last month, we watched a film about the dangers of plastics that literally litter our oceans and in some cases are ingested by ocean creatures that become part of our food supply.

So, everyone and everything is connected to everywhere, but everybody needs their own place, too – a sacred place.

Willard, p.3

We talked after that movie about these issues and how difficult it is to do anything about them because of the stronger influence of industrial and national powers competing with each other. But one thing we can do is to begin to talk about it; And one thing I can do is to begin to talk about it from the pulpit.

Politics can swiftly get entangled in the discussion about 'the environment' and that would be counterproductive. But a better way would be to talk about land, sea, and sky as sacred space and how stewardship of the environment is part of our Christian tradition to recognize and honor sacred space that we have in common and individually.

First, we must ask: What makes a place sacred? In Christian tradition, places of worship are dedicated with prayers and the sprinkling of water. In colonial American times, it was a custom to sage a new house – to burn sage and allow its aroma to be carried into every room. Last summer, when we entered our new church building, we held our first service, beginning in the Narthex, moving into the Sanctuary, and finally, the Fellowship Hall. We sanctified it by what we did here.

A place is can become sacred by what happens there and by what memories are made there. But a place can also become scarred – or made inhospitable and profane, for the same reasons.

While I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary, we visited Providence Baptist Church in the inner city of Baltimore. They proclaimed having a church building that demonstrated 21st Century architecture that was solar heated. They had a large, beautiful sanctuary, but what I especially remember was a tower, separate from the main building, that had an upper room they called 'The Desert Room' – a place for private meditation. The church had been built on a triangular intersection – that had once been one of the worst bars in Baltimore. The people of that church had transformed that part of their neighborhood by tearing down the old structure, and turning that corner into a safe place to be.

Willard, p.4

The next step is recognizing every one needs sacred space
every creature must have a niche – their place under the sun
and we need to make room for each other.

And that also goes for people gathered as communities, nations,
and families.

There is certainly risk in making room for people who are different from us –
the fear that ‘they’ will take over and ‘we’ will lose our identity.

There is certainly historical precedent for that right here in Florida
where Ocklawaha, Calusa, Apopka, Withlacoochee, Okeechobee
were names from languages native to Florida at one time –
but are now foreign words to our ears.

There is risk, but it is also the way to self-discovery and growth
and trusting that there really are ‘many mansions’,
‘many dwelling places’ in the Kingdom
of God’s beloved community – that there is room enough.

After the Shabbat services the other night at Temple Shalom,
I got into this discussion about how peace
could ever be achieved in Israel/Palestine –
a very timely and political topic.

I believe the only way out of the impasse to peace there
is for both sides to ‘make room for the other’.

In making room for others, you have to come from somewhere yourself;
you have to be grounded somewhere as a place of refuge
that you carry within yourself;

Your Jerusalem has to be inside you to begin with.

To borrow from a popular expression, ‘no matter where you go, there you are’ –
but think of it this way: ‘no matter where you go, there you are’
in that place of refuge within yourself.

I had the opportunity to visit Israel in 1981

and on the last day I was there, I resolved to visit the Upper Room.

It was late in the afternoon and I drove out to Mount Zion

which is a hill just south of the old walled-city of Jerusalem.

There is a complex of several buildings that include King David’s Tomb and
a memorial with the names of all the Jewish communities
affected by the Holocaust.

As I was walking through a hallway, I suddenly felt excited
anticipating something wonderful ahead.

Willard, p.5

Then, I entered a large empty room with no signs to tell me where I was.

There was a set of steps and walk way on one side
and arched windows in the wall across from me.

I sat down on the steps and wondered if this were the Upper Room.

Suddenly, two English-speaking couples entered
and one of them took out a brochure and read,

“This is the Upper Room, scene of the Last Supper.”

I thought,

“They’re just tourists. What do they really know...”

Then, an American tour group came in and their Arab tour guide said,

“This is the Upper Room, scene of the Last Supper.

This is not the original building,
but constructed by the Crusaders in the 12th Century.”

Then, they sang “Amazing Grace” and went out.

I thought,

“Maybe this really is the Upper Room.”

Then, another American tour group came in and their Arab tour guide said,

“This is the Upper Room,

scene of the Last Supper.

This is not the original building,
but was constructed by the Crusaders in the 12th Century.”

The only thing that can be said for sure is that
the Last Supper took place somewhere here on Mt Zion.”

And he added that the Upper Room was also the scene of the Pentecost
when the Holy Spirit was visited upon the disciples

and gave birth to the Church.

Then, they sang “Amazing Grace” and another hymn and went out.

And I remembered the living room of good friends of mine where we often
got together for parties and just to hang out, and I thought,

“This was just an empty room before, when I first came in.

What made it come alive was people.”

People make a place holy.

And as I was leaving, I imagined Jesus sitting at one end of a table
filled with friends and saying to me.

“Come back anytime.”

So, friends, in the process of making room for others to have a sacred space,
remember that there is room enough – especially when you make room
for your own Jerusalem to carry with you in your heart.

Amen

1 Peter 2:1-10

[The Apostle Peter said,]

2:1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.

2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—

3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and

5 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.

6 For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

7 To you then who believe, he is precious;

but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner',

8 and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14:1-17

[Jesus said,]

14:1 'Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places.

If it were not so, would I have told you

that I go to prepare a place for you?

3 And if 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.

4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

5 Thomas said to him,

'Lord, we do not know where you are going.

How can we know the way?'

6 Jesus said to him,

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.

7 If you know me, you will know my Father also.

From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

8 Philip said to him,

'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

9 Jesus said to him,

'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, "Show us the Father"?

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own;

but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me;

but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me

will also do the works that I do and, in fact,

will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

13 I will do whatever you ask in my name,

so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,

to be with you for ever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive,

because it neither sees him nor knows him.

You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'