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At Home in the Spirit

Acts 2:4

The death of my mother last month has given me a deeper appreciation of the relationships which shape my life. The kind words and notes which so many of you have offered have given me a powerful sense of being connected to this family of faith. When I traveled to Kansas last week I was supported by an extended family which gathered for my mother's service. I am one of fourteen cousins who are scattered from the East coast to the West coast. Thirteen of them were present to celebrate my mother's life. It was also a time for my cousins and me to remember the generation that nurtured us. As we shared their stories we realized once again that we are the product of their vision, courage, and love.

The most surprising feature of that gathering was the response of family members from the generation younger than me. They were transfixed by the photographs and caught up in the stories. For my sons and my nephew and nieces the focal point of family identity is the home where their grandparents lived for 33 years before they sold it in 1999. Each of the grandchildren wanted to make a pilgrimage to that house. For most of their lives it was the anchor of stability in the midst of so many changes. But most of all the house is important to them because it is the place where they luxuriated in the love of their grandparents. They were at home there in a very special way. The pilgrimage to the house was a way to honor this relationship which meant so much to them.

Jesus addresses this issue in the 14th chapter of John. There we find Jesus offering a farewell sermon to the disciples after the last supper. Jesus' death will create for the disciples a very serious crisis. Their community is shaped by the unconditional acceptance that Jesus has extended to them. In his presence they are "at home" in a way that they have never experienced before. What will happen to the disciples and their fledgling community when Jesus is gone? Jesus wants them to know that the relationship between them will not end with his death. It is the same relationship that exists between Jesus and God. It does not depend on physical presence. It cannot be disrupted by death. The mark of that relationship is the Holy Spirit which will be for them a loving presence and compassionate guide.

This truth was affirmed in the first Sunday morning service held at Walnut and Edwards one hundred years ago. The church had lived in exile for almost two years after the building downtown was sold and demolished. It was a time when members must have felt empty and homeless. Like the Israelites of old they were wandering in the wilderness depending on the hospitality of other congregations where afternoon services were held. The new church under construction represented for them the promise of a fulfillment of their search for a home.

Then on May 26, 1907 a Sunday morning service was held in the section of the new church which was more or less finished. The pulpit from the 1869 church was set up in the Parish House. The people gathered in their new home. The Reverend A. P. Higley preached on the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. In Exodus 40 Moses is instructed to build a tent of meeting containing a tabernacle. This would be the place where God's presence could be most intensely experienced. The emphasis is not on the building as a holy place but on the relationship with a loving God. They are

preparing themselves to live in a much more intimate relationship with God. I don't have Higley's sermon but I would like to think that he used this passage to emphasize this church's relationship with God. They were looking for a spiritual home where God could lead them into deeper levels of fellowship, compassion, and service.

This is precisely what the disciples experienced on the day of Pentecost. They are gathered in Jerusalem ten days after the ascension of Christ. They are no doubt aware of the emptiness of their lives without Jesus. They are homesick for the compassionate presence which has changed their lives. Suddenly they hear something. Luke tells us that it was "a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting...all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-4)." Their emptiness is gone. Their homesickness disappears. They are truly filled. The relationship with God which Jesus had promised is now a reality. They are at home in the Spirit.

In a Presbyterian church in another city a young woman was asked to speak for a few minutes in the service about her experience of God. This young woman was a dancer in a professional ballet company. She was clearly more comfortable as a dancer than as a speaker. Her voice trembled as she spoke. She described growing up in the congregation. Then she spoke of her baptism. She looked around to locate the baptismal font. She pointed to it and announced that she had been baptized there. She then explained that she could not remember her baptism. She was just a baby at the time. She said,

But my father used to love to tell me about the baptismal dress I wore, about all the relatives who came to the service, about the hymns sung that day, about what the minister said in the sermon, and he would always end this story by exclaiming, 'Oh honey, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!'

She then explained that as a child sitting restless in worship she often wondered where the Holy Spirit was in her church. Is the Holy Spirit in the rafters? Is it in the organ pipes? In the stained glass windows? Then in a soft voice she said:

As many of you know, I lost both my parents in the same week last winter. In the midst of that terrible week, I was driving home from the hospital, having visited my parents, knowing that I might never see them alive again, and I stopped by the church, just to think and to pray. Sarah Graham was in the church kitchen, getting ready for a family night supper, and she saw me sitting all by myself in one of the back pews. She knew what was happening in my life, knew about my parents, and took off her apron and came and sat beside me, holding my hand and praying with me. It was then that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church (Thomas G. Long, *Journal For Preachers*, Pentecost 2007, pages 53-54).

That is the good news of Pentecost. No matter how desperate our search, God is at work creating a home where we are truly loved.