

May 27, 2018 • Lay Servant Ministers Sunday • Trinity Sunday

## “Coming Home” Sermon by Ron Theile



John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I would like to thank my fellow lay speakers for taking part in this morning’s worship service. Lay Speakers are an important ministry within the United Methodist Church connection. There are classes that teach an individual how to better use their personal resources, to better themselves, their congregations and the United Methodist Church. A special thanks to Mary Crawford, Mike Olsson, Chris Reagh, Rose Kujawa, Bee Campbell and Wynn Battig.

Each time it is Lay Speaker Sunday, one of us has to plan for our gathering. We are always reminded how much work and planning go into a worship service. So, I speak for all of us in thanking our pastoral staff, Dr. Smith and the choir for all the work that they do to provide spiritual and meaningful worship services for us all. However, this also gives us the opportunity to learn their secret in accomplishing this task. That is the administrative staff. Not much, if anything, would happen in this congregation without them. So, a very special well done and thank you from us all for all you do!

As a child growing up on the south side of Chicago, I had a boy’s most valued possession, besides a dog, of course. I had a red bicycle that was given to me for my birthday. It was used when I received it, but that made no difference. As with any boy or girl a bicycle presents the opportunity to be mobile with your friends. It also provided, for myself, the opportunity to be alone. To observe and explore and to ride as fast as I could with the wind blowing past my face and through my hair and then suddenly stopping and doing a successful 360 by locking the break up. Only one thing surpassed that feeling. By instinct alone, I knew there was a certain time in the afternoon I should be in front of the house, which was about in the middle of the block. I would keep glancing down the street waiting for the Chicago Transit Authority bus to pull up. I knew it was about time for dad to come home. Dad worked downtown and took the Illinois central train to Kensington, and then got on the 113th St. bus which brought him to within one half block of our home. He was easily spotted with his fedora and his overcoat. I would run that half block and then fly into his powerful arms and he would spin me around, only once. He would put me down and I would hug him losing myself in his overcoat. And then we would walk home. I would carefully match his pace one foot at a time and I even tried to match how his left and right foot would be pointed slightly off to the right or the left. Dad was home.

For me, there was nothing like having Dad home. I felt safe and secure. Even if I got up in the middle of the night, my route through the house, to the bathroom, took me by the front windows. And no matter the hour it seemed, he was always there on the screened-in front porch in his rocking chair, not reading or watching TV, but just watching. I was safe and secure. I believed there was nothing in the world that could get by him.

I also fondly recall Christmas Eve at grandma and grandpa’s house. The family, uncles, aunts, and cousins would all be in the paneled basement that was decorated with twinkle lights and garland with a large table in the middle where we would all break bread together. It was exciting being together in anticipation of our opening presents. The sound was overwhelming. But, I would walk upstairs to grandma and grandpa’s living room. The decorations were detailed, exact, a little worn, and each one had its purpose. The silver aluminum tree would stand tall and I would sit on the couch, alone, and watch the colors change as the light wheel rotated reflecting and changing the colors of the tree. It was beautiful, but more importantly, it was peaceful. Even as a child, it was a moment that I could reflect. The feeling I had was perfect peace.

Safe, secure, peaceful.

With these three words, I typed this combination on Google, added the word children, so that I could find one word for this feeling. It’s amazing! I could only find “the importance of being there for your children,” “why stay at home parents are good for children,” “the importance of being little,” “the importance of family health,” “how important it is for your child to be bored.” As exact as the Internet is, I failed to find one word and the definition that would best describe the combination of feelings that I experienced. That being, Safe, Secure, and Perfect Peace.

So, I decided to look up the definition of each. Safe: protected from or not exposed to danger or risk; not likely to be harmed or lost. Secure: fixed or fastened so as not to give way, become loose, or be lost. Peace: freedom from disturbance; quiet and tranquility. The quality or state of being tranquil; calm.

I kept searching and finally found how I felt in a poem entitled  
My Foundation by Annette R. Hershey which was only recently published in January of this year. It reads:

This structure is very special.  
It means the world to me.  
It began on a strong foundation,  
A very secure place to be.

When I have been threatened,  
It has sheltered me from the storm.

Individual bricks placed by loving hands  
Make up this solid form.

The walls echo with sounds of laughter,  
The decor shows signs of wear.  
Warmth emits from every room,  
Reminiscence events for us to share.

My parents are my foundation.  
They mean the world to me.  
The structure is our family,  
A very secure place to be.

At this point I believe it is important to recognize that the families of today's world may be different, but still offer this experience of which I speak. Families of today may not have two parents as I did. After all, 64% of our children at school come from single parent homes. We also have blended homes of every diversity you could imagine and the children are very happy, well-adjusted students. That being said, let me continue.

Even as an adult, returning home to my parents' home, I still had these feelings, no matter how old I was. I begged myself to answer the question what will it be like when they are no longer upon this earth. I failed to find the answer because I could not imagine them gone. The answer came after dad past away, and then, mom. Only then, did I fully realize the precious gift that God the Father had blessed me with. For, I had these feelings even after my parents departed this earth. It was God who had provided the vehicle for these feelings I had as a child and even as an adult; that being Mom and Dad. And, only upon writing this sermon, did I not only fully comprehend these blessings but also considered the price God, and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, paid to provide me and us with these blessings.

Our gospel lesson says it all. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." His Son! To us! To die upon the cross. Think about that. The father gives up his son. Think of the pain we have witnessed of parents who have lost their children to violence. Think of those parents running towards the school that had a shooting and the anguish on their face with just the thought that there is the possibility their children have been taken from them.

Jesus was raised as a carpenter by his parents who surrounded him with love and provided for him a safe, secure place that, although only small accounts of Jesus as a youth are written in the Book of Luke, provided him a peaceful environment, and began in his adult life to preach throughout the hills of Galilee. And then, he knew, he was meant to die on the cross. It is almost incomprehensible how much he suffered during his crucifixion, the physical brutality, and the feeling of being given up by the people. Even the disciples hid during this time and if not for his mother Mary, James, and Mary Magdalene, he would have endured this alone. His suffering was not complete until he uttered the words, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me." Here is someone who spent almost every waking moment speaking about his Heavenly Father and how much he loved us all. He spoke of a God that you could turn to at any time no matter how desolate your feelings. He preached that God the Father provided safety, security, peace and love. What anguish he must have felt, that in his final minutes of life, he would have to suffer total abandonment by his Father.

I have seen and heard what total abandonment is like. Mark Twain Middle School, where I teach the bell choir that, as you all know, have played here many times, immediately knows when one of our ringer family members is in distress. I have seen and heard what total abandonment looks and sounds like when that ringer tells us that their parents are separating and seeking a divorce. They say that they will live with one of their parents. But they are feeling that they have lost the safety security and peacefulness it comes from not knowing what the future holds. They are inconsolable. Their tears come from deep within the soul. The pain on their face is unbearable to look upon. Many of the children, and including myself, cry together. It takes the entire force of our choir family to convince them, with love and tenderness, that they are not alone. And yet, they continue to weep.

It is unimaginable what Jesus must have felt. Immeasurable anguish that His father had abandoned Him. But, God had to abandon Jesus. God had to thrust the sins of the world: past, present, and future sins. Our sins. And then God, who is perfection and is without sin, had to turn the other way. Jesus had to take the sins of the world upon him and suffer and die for those sins. He had to pay the price so that every one of us can be forgiven. God abandoned Jesus so that we, his children, would never have to be abandoned by our Heavenly Father.

But the darkness of that time changes from suffering and abandonment to life eternal. Jesus rises from the dead to return home to his Heavenly Father. His resurrection is proof that we will be forgiven of our sins, and we shall rise above death to join all those believers who have gone before us and have also been forgiven and returned home to our Heavenly Father in the Kingdom Triumphant. Today's Offertory, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" tells us, "perverse and foolish off I strayed, but yet in love he sought me, and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing brought me." Later in the Book of John in the 14th chapter, Jesus begins with calming words, words of comfort: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me." He had just spoken of His own death and His disciples' hearts were troubled. He was telling them, "Settle your hearts; still your anxious thoughts. You believe in God. Believe in Me too. Trust in God, and trust in Me."

Then He says, "In my Father's house are many mansions" The Greek word translated "mansions" here doesn't mean mansions as we think of them today. It literally means a "dwelling place" or an "abode" or "home." Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my words: and my Father will love you, and you will come unto the Father, and make your home with God." The key point Jesus was making was not how big a place you're going to get, but that there is a place for us all in God's house.

Jesus calls to us to say we are forgiven and are promised, through His resurrection that we can go through life, and through him know that we can be safe, secure and live with peace knowing that he paid the price for us and rose from the dead to prove His promise. Thanks be to God for the gift of his only son that through him we are forgiven of our sins and promised eternal life as those believers who came before us. And as for me, I will again run that half block and then fly into his powerful arms and he will spin me around, only once. He will put me down and I will, again, hug him and lose myself in his overcoat. And I, as we all, will be home again.

Amen.