

*(I have used Diana Butler-Bass' words from her book Grounded verbatim, throughout the sermon, mixing them with my own reflections and illustrations. I have bolded the words that come directly from the book.)*

## **Grounded: Home ~ A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood**

Ruth 1:16-17 & Luke 10:25-37

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent ~ April 7, 2019 ~ Pastor Jo Ramsey

What does the word home mean to you? Is it where you live? Is it the people or animals you live with? Is it the house you grew up in, where you reside now, or a place for which you're still searching? Is home a place at all, or is it a state of mind?

Since 9/11, the U.S. has been in the midst of a “radical homemaking” movement. The popularity of HGTV and the DIY networks has soared in the last few decades. Businesses like Home Goods and Wayfair have sprung up to meet consumer demand. We've rekindled our love for home gardens, home brewing, home schooling, home birth, home churches, and working from home. At the same time, **the definition of “home” has expanded to include cafes, coffeehouses, gyms, parks, virtual communities and social networks.**

This Lent, we've been exploring how we experience God through creation and community, and how those experiences can ground us in our faith. Today, we consider home and neighborhood. These are the places where we first encounter love, care, companionship, sharing, forgiveness, community and shared identity. These formative experiences teach us who God is, how He loves us and how we should love one another.

Where is home? What is home? **Home is more than a house. Home is a relationship between a place, people and God. It is a sacred dwelling. The places we come to know as “home” involve an intangible flash of recognition, a soul connection—to some deep part of us, with the environment and with God. Home involves history, memory, story and ritual. It imparts identity and meaning... Home is a place where we belong.**

**Home includes the people with whom we live, who together create a place with some expectation of provision, warmth, and security. Ideally, homes are created around the values of shared love and mutual commitment.** Families form when people make promises to one another, as we read in Ruth today, “I will go where you go, stay where you stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

**Home is also a vulnerable place, the location of our most tender and intimate moments, where kindness is essential for the safety and growth of all who reside within. For all its promise of grace, home can be a horror, as well.** For some, home involves chaos, instability, addiction and even violence. The wounds inflicted may take a lifetime to heal. But ideally, even in our less-than-perfect-but-not-abusive homes, we can develop the ability **to trust, to receive from others, to dream and create. Home is the place where we learn to the power of mercy and forgiveness.**

It is at home, rather than at church, that we first encounter God. At home, we learn that **God is with us, an intimate and domestic presence, empowering us to experience the world as a “holy habitation.”**

Diana Butler Bass, the author of Grounded, suggests that two places in our homes most symbolize the sacred nature of home: **the front door and the table. At our doors, we form the spiritual habit of hospitality; at our table, we practice gratitude. In both places, we form traditions that we carry beyond the walls of our private homes to a more meaningful shared life with our neighbors.**

**The English word “neighbor” comes from the Old English words nigh for near, and gebur for dweller. Put simply, people create neighborhoods when they gather together beyond family ties, live close to others, and choose to share certain resources which include electricity, schools, roads, places of worship, stores, and parks.**

**Human beings have always built neighborhoods around some principle of likeness. We feel safer when we are near those who understand us, whose lives are enmeshed socially and economically, and who share a common outlook. Unfortunately, difficulties arise when strong ties and likeness mutate into exclusion and conformity, and when the disparities between neighborhoods reflect unfair access to resources and opportunities, or the lack thereof.**

The City of Pittsburgh is known for its vibrant, bustling neighborhoods—ninety of them, to be exact! Lawrenceville, Bloomfield, The Hill District, Squirrel Hill, Troy Hill---each community offers a particular vibe---shopping, nightlife, housing. Pittsburghers have a strong sense of identity and place. We are the Steel City, the City of Champions, Steeler Nation. Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, filmed right here in WQED, taught us what it means to embrace and celebrate our neighbors!

Neighborhoods are often spoken of with nostalgia, as if the very notion of neighborhood is crumbling away. In our cities, this decline is linked to poverty, poor education, crime and racial tensions. In suburbia, the lack of sidewalks and porches, and the transient nature of residents have all contributed to a sense of isolation. People do not feel they belong.

Butler-Bass, however, suggests neighborhoods have not so much declined as **been transformed by population growth, economic disruption, demographics, culture and technology. Technology isn’t eroding our neighborhoods; it’s stretching our understanding of what they include. Perhaps our biggest challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that we have moved to a new global neighborhood and aren’t sure how to get along with our new neighbors!**

**All of the world’s religions make neighbors the central concern of spirituality and ethics. Love of God and neighbor are absolutely intertwined. Jesus made this case succinctly when asked by the Pharisee to name the greatest commandment. Jesus responds, “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” This is the**

**Christian version of the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The way we treat our neighbors is central both to the good life now, and to eternal life with God.**

The next question for both the Pharisee and for us, is ‘Who exactly is my neighbor?’ In response, Jesus shares a dramatic parable with a surprise ending. The neighbor is a Samaritan, an unclean outcast! Much to the dismay of his listeners, **Jesus enlarges the sphere of neighborhood to include those we deem objectionable.**

**The tension between the Golden Rule and the boundaries of neighborhood form a central challenge of our Christian faith.** Love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. They go together. **If we understand that neighborly relations—that is, how we interact with and treat those in our community--are woven into divine love, then we can grasp that God is, essentially, a near-dwelling God. God abides with us as a gathered community of neighbors.**

Pastor James and I are reminded of this over and over here in our East Union neighborhood. When we see IHN families enjoying dinner in the Spot. When we see folks picking up food from the Food Bank. When we see children arriving for preschool or VBS. When we walk into an EUCC filled with our Faithful Followers. When our shut-ins feel the love of their church through Deacon visits and home communion. When our music carries across the hills during summer worship. God dwells here. His love is everywhere!

We’ve seen that love flooding through our neighborhood in a powerful way these last few weeks, as our community comes together to mourn the loss of another Deer Lakes teen to suicide. We are heartbroken for Maura Rupprecht, and her family and friends, even as we trust that she is now at peace in God’s embrace.

Even as we grieve and worry for our kids, the Holy Spirit has been at work among us! Frank McCoy and our East Union Youth Mission Team have felt called to turn over their upcoming Dodgeball Tournament to the Deer Lakes High School Boosters Unite group to raise funds for mental health awareness. Moving forward, East Union Church will play a key role in promoting a community-wide effort to address the real and pressing need for emotional health and well-being in our community. Who better to share a message of hope and healing in our neighborhood?

For that is the promise of our faith—that nothing can separate us from the love of God! Nothing -- not addiction, not abuse, not depression or anxiety, not a breakup, no humiliation on social media, no unwanted pregnancy, no failure or rumor or secret. Because God dwells within us and among us, in our hearts and homes and neighborhoods. God is with us and loves us. He has been with us since the beginning, he will be with us at the end, and all the time in between. We are rooted and grounded in God’s love, a love so wide and long, so high and deep that we cannot see its end. And in that love, we are always home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.