

“Where We Dwell”

Matthew 17:1-9

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson
Interim Associate Minister

February 19, 2023

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Where We Dwell”

Matthew 17:1-9

+++++

Let us pray: *O Ever-present and Ever-near God, come to us, now, in this time of prayerful reflection. Inspire us and instruct us through Your Word and through the words that you place on each of our hearts. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name.*

In your name, we pray, Amen!

+++++

The last time that I preached, you may recall that I mentioned my Pennsylvania roots.

And so, this morning, I'd like to begin by sharing another personal story – as we continue to become better acquainted during these transitional times at First Church.

Prior to moving to Columbus eighteen years ago, our family lived in Dallas, TX.

Back then, we had been moving around every couple of years or so – with Shane's career ... and at **that** stage in our lives, that worked well for us!

Shane and I were both curious and open to experiencing life in different cities and in different regions of the country.

So, this had been the **second time** that we had lived in Dallas, and, as you may know,

Dallas has been long regarded as one of the more transient cities across our nation.

And that is because people have been drawn to Dallas because it is home to numerous corporate headquarters and universities and major medical centers – plus its cost of living had been more affordable in Dallas as compared to other large cities.

So, anyway, at that stage of life, I was at home with our then-three young children –

and our beloved church there (a UCC congregation) was small and didn't have many *other* young families.

And so, a new friend – who I met at a music class for young children – and I both realized that we needed to become pro-active in order to create community – for ourselves and for other families who shared similar values and commitments.

And so, through the Dallas Peace Center, we formed a group of several families and called ourselves, the “Parents as Peacemakers.”

It became a book group and a support group and a playgroup for our children.

And once or twice a week, we would meet in each other's homes or at a park or a playground or at the library for story time!

And ... it wasn't a surprise that not **one** of us who were part of the Parents as Peacemakers had relatives or roots in Dallas – and perhaps **that** is why the bonds that we formed with each other were so strong

– and the relationships that our families developed with one another
– over time – grew deep.

I have a very *vivid* memory of **one** of the gatherings that **our** family hosted in our home during those days.

On that particular day, the moms among us were *attempting* to discuss a then-new book by Thich Nhat Hanh (the well-known Buddhist monk/author) *while* our little ones were crawling and toddling and running all over the place!

In that moment, there was this beautiful chorus of discordant notes, if you will, the sounds of giggles and babbling ... and some whining and crying, too!

And then, all of a sudden – for quite a few seconds, it became especially quiet ... so much so that you could have heard a pin drop!

And, as some of us looked around to make sure that all the children were safe and okay, my friend, Maya, cleared her throat – and very softly, she spoke the following words:

This is a moment in time ... this is a moment in time! And without the need for further explanation, all of us – the adults – knew *exactly* what Maya meant.

It was a moment in time to savor as kindred spirits – for those were days that we would always cherish – because, after all, we all knew that Dallas, at that time, was a place where many people tended to come ... and then leave!

Maya was right that day! It was, indeed, a moment in time – because within the next eighteen months:

Maya moved to the Philippines,
Katrin moved back to Germany,
Suzann moved to Philadelphia,
Kate moved back to Boston,
and our family relocated here, to Columbus, Ohio.

Those days, during that time – when we were living together as an intentional community --- was, looking back, *a moment in time!*

A moment in time, a moment in time.

What are the “moments in time” that you can identify within your life?

How have those “moments in time” gone on to shape your life?

And how have those moments brought closure – or how have they marked new beginnings along your journeys?

You know, I’ve preached on this familiar text – this story of the Transfiguration – a number of times before – but this time, to my surprise – it was Maya’s voice that I could hear.

And the memory of ***that particular*** “moment in time” – all those years ago – came to mind – when I read, once again, Peter’s plea when he said:

*Lord, it is good for us to be here;
if you wish, I will make three **dwelling**s here,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*

For Peter knew that that indescribable and holy moment – with Jesus and James and John – not to mention Moses and Elijah – would never be repeated or re-created.

Peter knew that it was a *moment in time!*

As we try to picture that scene, up there, on that mountain top, with Jesus and Peter and James and John – we can only imagine that their emotions must have been running deep!

For we recall that in recent times – back in the previous chapter of Matthew (chapter 16), Jesus had already started to prepare his disciples – and told them that he eventually **must go** to Jerusalem.

He *even* told them that he was to suffer many things at the hand of the elders,

and that he would also be killed ... and on the third day, be raised to life!

No wonder!

No wonder that Peter was clinging to that moment in time – that precious time together with Jesus.

No wonder – in Peter's desperation – that he even came up with a plan – as unrealistic as it may have been ... that is, to build three dwelling places for Jesus and Moses and Elijah.

For Peter would do anything to **slow. down. time** – *anything* to cling to every single moment together – *and anything* to try to hold and house and somehow contain Jesus!

In *that* moment, Peter would have done anything to prevent or put off the inevitable for as long as possible.

Up there – on that mountain – Peter was desperate to hold on to that *moment in time* for as long as he could – with Jesus and Moses and Elijah.

In fact, Peter even wanted to memorialize it by erecting dwelling places for each of them.

But Jesus would have **nothing** of it! For Jesus was **NOT** sent by God to stay put.

Rather, Jesus was sent to go and do and preach and teach and heal.

Jesus' ministry was to go **to** the people – wherever they were -- and to love them and to meet them in all their need.

As I was preparing for this sermon today – and focusing on Peter's insistence of making *dwelling places* for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, I became curious about the usage of the word, *dwelling*, in this Bible passage.

And in my word study, I discovered that the Biblical Greek word for *dwelling* is **katoikeo (Kot-oy-Kay-oh)**, and in the New Testament, **katoikeo** is translated in many different ways including: *shelter* or *tent* or *booth* or *shrine* or *altar* or *tabernacle*.

But the most accurate translation of KATOIKEO is **to dwell in or to inhabit**.

Keeping **that** in mind, this familiar Transfiguration story takes on a **profoundly** different meaning if we come to understand – along

with Peter – that *Christ's dwelling* is **not** a place or a thing outside of us – but within us.

And when we follow Jesus down that mountain and into the valley – and go wherever **Jesus** leads us to worship and pray and serve and work and do justice, it is *our* hearts and *our* lives and *our* relationships and *our* communities that then become transfigured by God's grace and mercy and unconditional love for each one of us!

I'd like to close this morning with some words of wisdom from the late Henri Nouwen, a prolific writer and sage and spiritual midwife to many.

In the book, *Here and Now*, Nowen wrote:

The great mystery of the spiritual life—the life in God— is that we don't have to wait for it as something that will happen later.

Jesus says: "Dwell in me as I dwell in you."

*It is **this** divine in-dwelling that **is** eternal life. It is the active presence of God at the center of our living— the movement of God's Spirit within us—that gives us eternal life.*

Thanks be to God! Amen!

