

“Finding Home”

Acts 7:55-60; I Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 5, May 7, 2023, dedicated to the memory of Glenn Bardus who entered Eternal Life on April 25th and to Sharon who loved him for 62+years in marriage and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations
of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock,
and our salvation. Amen.*

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All of us dream of home. We dream of home as the place which has a certain spirit of love and tranquility, with certain people we wish to be close to, located in a place which brings us peace. At some level in our hearts and minds, all of us dream of making home, finding home and eventually – going home.

Finding home is a theme in our passages today. In I Peter, Acts and John, we encounter three passages of scripture about the authenticity of finding our home in Christ. I Peter 2:2-10, we find “safe haven,” like little babies, the spiritual milk that we need to grow our faith. We ourselves become part of the very “structure,” the home, the spiritual house that First Peter speaks of. If we remember that his audience was a group of dispossessed people, people who had no unifying dignity and identity apart from being a church, the

power of these words expands in our hearing. What a transformation, from “no people” to “God’s people!”

If you have ever felt like a “nobody,” and then a “somebody,” you can really identify with Peter’s words. Have you ever felt outside and alone, and then part of something greater than yourself? We can perhaps imagine how it would have sounded to their ears, those dispossessed people, if they knew that they were “nobody” in the minds and eyes of the world, but then became part of a “chosen race” with words like “holy” and “royal” used to describe them. What would it feel like to come out of darkness into the “marvelous light” of God?

Simply this – it feels like coming home.

The stoning death of Stephen in Acts takes us to another realm of “peace” in Christ. Stephen is so wrapped up in living God’s way that he forgets to protect himself. Other ordinary Christians have been like Stephen – so caught up in being “in Christ” that they give themselves fully to God. Like Stephen, they are not seeking martyrdom. Rather, they are living fully into the call of Christ to serve, to love and be witnesses of our faith. They are “living stones” in the household of our faith. As martyrs of our faith, Stephen and others through the ages find their eternal home in Christ.

How did Stephen arrive in his heavenly home? We know some things about Stephen. Stephen was the first martyr of our faith. He was one of the first seven Deacons of THE First (Congregational?) Church of Jerusalem, circa 33AD. As a Deacon, Stephen had a Biblical job description – serve tables, help out around the church as needed and care for the poor on the streets of Jerusalem. But like our Deacons, today, Stephen didn’t just do what was written on the page. He went beyond the job description.

Once the Apostle’s hands are laid on his head, all the grace and power of baptism in Jesus’ name flow into him, he is fired up and ready to go. This Deacon gets it into his heart, mind and spirit that he needs to climb into the pulpit and preach – and so he does.

And when Stephen preaches with power, he gets into trouble for telling the truth. His accusers say he is slandering Moses and God. But he points out that everything he says was first said by Moses and the prophets before after him. Moses accused his people of not worshipping God in spirit and truth. Stephen tells the leaders of the Sanhedrin, *“you have your nerve to charge that I have violated Moses and his law – look at yourselves.”*

He focuses his preaching on all the great spiritual forebearers of faith – everyone from Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses and all the way to his current day. He points to the truth of these prophets and shows how it is the leaders of the First Century temple, not Jesus and the early disciples, who are being unfaithful to God. Stephen makes the case for Jesus – that he was fulfilling the law and the prophets, and like the prophets before him, Jesus was persecuted unto death.

His sermon seals his doom. He shows people their infidelity to God, and they can't bear to hear another word. He sees heaven. He sees Jesus at the right hand of God. Once he sees Jesus side by side with God, and announces that to his gathered accusers, his fate is sealed. He is as good as dead.

Stephen is buried in the brutality of death by stoning. While he is being pummeled by stones, Saul a pharisee, who later converts to Christianity and becomes the Apostle Paul and a martyr as well, stands by approvingly and “watches over” the cloaks of those who cast the stones.

As he is dying, Stephen paraphrases Psalm 31:5 as he prays, *“LORD Jesus, receive my spirit.”* Then knocked to his knees, with his eyes on heaven, he cries out his last words, *“LORD, do not hold this sin against them.”* The first Christian martyr dies, like Jesus, with forgiveness as his last breath. With his last breath, Stephen goes “home” to be with God and Jesus.

In her sermon, “Blood of Martyrs,” Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on martyrdom with these words, *“I do not think you can seek martyrdom any more than you can avoid it. I think it just happens sometimes, when people get so wrapped up in living God's life that they forget to protect themselves.”*

Martyrs are “ordinary” Christians. None of them seek martyrdom. All of them, and all the martyrs before and since, simply live out the gospel in their particular circumstances, even if it cost them their lives. Each of the martyrs stories have a common thread of uncomfortable truth about what constitutes “Christian success,” and what does not. Each finds a home in Christ.

Our “success” is not found in converting other people to our way of thinking. Our “success” is not found in having the most beautiful church in town. Our “success” is not even going out of our way to be kind and generous. In the case of every martyr of our faith, true “Christian success” comes down to telling the truth so clearly that some people want to kill you for it.

Telling the truth does not always end in martyrdom – but it could. While there are many ways, we may seek to change our surrounding culture and the times we live in, bringing a prophetic voice of critique to anything that harms God’s children are really why we have been put here as Christians.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (another martyr of our faith) noted years ago, the church has too often been “the taillights” instead of “the headlights” in the journey toward justice and righteousness. Taillights can never lead. They only light up when you put on the brakes. It is the headlights that guide us forward in the darkest times.

So, what do you want to be – a headlight or a taillight? Do you want to speak the truth with love to the injustice and lies of our times or do you want to complain silently when those injustices and lies wreak havoc now and into the future as they remain unaddressed? I encourage each of us to be truthful and live with the consequences. No time like the present. Let’s start right now (or continue right now if you are already a headlight!).

Finally, in John’s gospel, we truly find our way home in Christ. Jesus offers his disciples an abiding place in God. Some interpret John 14:1, “in my Father’s house there are many ‘MANSIONS’.” In other words, there is room enough for ALL in God’s abiding love. There is room enough in the pew. There is

room enough in the house of God. There is room enough in eternity. There is simply – room enough for ALL in God we come to know in Jesus Christ.

We in the church need to know that the radical inclusion of God in Christ welcomes all. Moreover, this is not our house. It is God's house. When we speak of it, we need to see ourselves as those who are stewards of a gift given by God. We are merely transitory beings residing in God's cathedral of grace – here on earth and throughout eternity.

Jesus also promises his disciples that the pathway to God is through him. He says, **“I am the way, the truth and the life.”** I love what Catholic theologian and Biblical Scholar, John Dominic Crossan says about this. Fr. Crossan's translation of the familiar “I am the way...” verse from John is this: **“I am the authentic (truth) vision (way) of existence (life).”** *I am the authentic vision of existence.* Isn't that beautiful? *The authentic vision of existence.*

Jesus embodies and “demonstrates absolute, total, and universal love” for all, and his “life, teaching, and behavior do indeed present people with ‘an authentic vision of human existence,’ that is, a model of the way human life ought to be lived” in order to “encounter God, who is Love.”

What this does is set the vision of Christ in the right light – not one which separates him from everybody else but one in which he draws people into unity in God's name. This must have been a consoling message to the early Jewish Christians and the early Gentile converts. They could have experienced great anxiety over losing their spiritual home (the synagogue) because of their belief in Jesus. Instead, Jesus was consoling them and drawing them close. In the same way, we can be consoled knowing that his presence in our lives draws us together with our neighbors who may not look like us, sound like us, worship like us, and express their love of God – like us. That is truly a vision of authentic human existence – which by the way – is Good News!

We are all seeking a way home. In the words of I Peter, we are seeking to come out of darkness into the “marvelous light” of God. As we travel the road to home, will we as followers of Christ be (in the words of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr.) taillights or headlights on the journey home to justice and righteousness? Will we be led by the prevailing culture of our times and simply be the taillights of this story? Or will we lead boldly, brightly lighting the road before us?

How will you follow the yearning in your soul to find home? To find our peace at home in Christ, we are called to follow “the way, the truth and the life” who is the **authentic vision of existence**. May the Lord bless and keep you as you find home in God. Amen.

* Drawn in some parts from the reflections/writings of The Rev. Dr. Kate Matthews on the texts of the day from www.ucc.org, “*Weekly Seeds*” for Easter 5 in the “A cycle” of the lectionary.

