

First Congregational UCC, Appleton WI

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John 14:23-29, "God's Home"

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Jesus spoke those words to his Disciples on the night that he was betrayed. The night before he was crucified. He knew that the hour of his death was coming. Jesus was never really one for small talk. But on that Passover festival, every action, and every utterance, carried the weight and urgency of finality. These were his last and lasting words.

And what did Jesus speak of on his final night? He spoke of peace, and the extraordinary things to come – his death, resurrection, and ascension, and the wild and untamable gift of the Holy Spirit.

He spoke of his deep and abiding relationship with the one whom he knew as his Father. I know that word can sound tricky, even limiting. I have come to understand that for Jesus, the word Father was not about gender, but about relationship. For Jesus, everything was about relationship.

When it comes down to it, everything he spoke of on his final night was about love. But before he could surrender himself to the way of the cross, before he could humble himself by scrubbing the filth from the disciples' feet, before he could heal the sick and embrace the sinner and confound the self-righteous, he had to show up.

There's a verse in the beginning of the gospel of John that has been translated like this:

The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

The same translator renders today's text in a similar way. He speaks of Jesus and his father moving into the neighborhood. Taking up residence on our home turf. No need to go searching. Love is right here.

God responded to the unfathomable depths of human suffering by showing up. By making a home with us. God folded God's divinity into a profoundly vulnerable shape. In Jesus, God became one of us, every bit as human as you and I. Every bit as vulnerable to paper cuts and chickenpox and grief.

God did this because God loves us. God did this because the only way to really embrace someone in pain is to have a set of arms. The only way to hold the hand of someone shaking with fear is to have a sweaty palm of your own. The only way to share a meal with friends is to have teeth and taste buds. The only way to lay down your life for your friends is to first become flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood.

He did not move into a safe neighborhood. He moved into a neighborhood crushed by oppression and hemmed in by violence. He moved into a neighborhood that knew grief, pain, and suffering. That matters, doesn't it?

The Disciples were gathered in the presence of the Word Made Flesh, God in a body. And he is telling them what will happen so that when it does, they will believe. But even as he broke the unnerving news that he would no longer be with them, he promised them that God was sending another holy presence in his place. An Advocate who would never leave their side. God goes to extraordinary lengths to reassure us that we are loved, and that we are never alone.

I want to tell you of the time I witnessed a glimpse of holy love and presence, a time when the words of this scripture became flesh and blood and moved into my own neighborhood, many years ago now. It is also a story of love between parent and child.

The boy was sick. There was one harrowing night when it was unclear that he would make it through until morning. He got so sick so fast, the infection multiplying in his bloodstream and invading his organs. But the doctors worked relentlessly to save his life, and they did. They saved him. For days, the boy remained in a coma as machines and medicines kept him alive while the antibiotics slowly reclaimed his body from the bacteria.

Eventually, the sepsis receded enough that the doctors could begin the complex and risky process of weaning him off the various interventions. And so it was that the boy was gradually eased out of total sedation - a critical step toward recovery.

Waking up in a hospital bed, confused and in pain, is terrifying. And this little boy had to do it over and over and over again. This is what happened when he awoke. His mother and his father bent close to him, taking his hands and touching his cheeks, and they repeated words of love and comfort. They told him where he was. They told him he was going to be okay. And they told him that they were there. *Mon is here. Dad is here.*

Over and over and over again.

I tell you what I told those parents: in the midst of one of the most terrifying hospital stays I've ever witnessed as a pastor, the vision of those parents comforting that little boy remains one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. It was a glimpse of God's love. I am not sure I knew just how deep and wide and fierce and suffering the love of God really is until I saw it like that.

The love and care and compassion and promise of presence those parents lavished upon their son is precisely the love and care and compassion and promise of presence God lavishes upon each one of us. Through the gift of Jesus. And through the gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the one the Father sends in the name of the Son.

When I asked these parents for their blessing to tell this story, they told me something else. A day or so after the boy was coming out of sedation and was fairly lucid, they told him that they had been in the hospital for "a couple days." He replied in his raspy voice, "Longer than that.....I think we've been here for more than a week."

They were shocked he had any sense of time, as he had been heavily sedated through most of it. His mother then said, "You know Dad and I have been here the entire time, we never left your side. Even if one of us had to step out of the room for a minute, the other one stayed." He replied so casually, "Yeah, I know." His untroubled heart brought his mother to tears.

Friends, I believe God longs for us to know that same comfort and confidence. God wants us to trust that at our worst moments, we are held in a mercy deeper than the ocean. Whatever the nature of the crisis at hand, we are gripped by a love that will not let us go, a peace that surpasses understanding. We abide in a Spirit so Holy the world cannot see it. But as people of faith, we can know it nonetheless.

We are not alone. God makes a home with us.

Jesus has to step out of the room for a minute. But the Holy Spirit remains. Amen.