

In Search of Home

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Here we are, a year after the most devastating election in our lifetime, and it's once again time to pass the turkey and cranberry sauce and stuff ourselves with patience for those political conversations that are certain to produce acid reflux. Yet, like lemmings, there is a navigational system within us that compels us to go home for the holidays...wherever that home may be, even if it is with family that drives us crazy, or family that we love deeply (and they can be one and the same), or even a stranger's home. Home is a powerful word, a powerful concept, a powerful yearning, and I thought it to be worthy of our contemplation this morning.

With that in mind, I'd like to share this story with you. The last year of my mother's life, she was in an Alzheimer's Unit at an enormous Catholic nursing facility in Fall River, MA. One day, shortly before her passing, I was driving back to my church in Westborough on Rte. 24 going north and I noticed a flock of birds flying in formation, going in the same direction that I was traveling.

After a short while I noticed them rearranging themselves, and one of the birds from the rear flew up to be the leader. It didn't take them very long to realign themselves behind him, but it seemed that the leader wasn't quite sure where they were going. First he veered left, and they followed. Quickly he spun to a sharp right, and the others scrambled to stay the course. Then he dipped down. Then he shot up. Then he zig-zagged. (Sing song.)

At first I thought it was pretty funny, and I decided that he was either messing around with them, just for fun, or he had no sense of direction whatsoever and didn't know how to find home. **This last thought hit me like a bolt of lightning.** I suddenly saw myself in that

bird. You see, it didn't matter where I went in the world, the family farm was always my true north...the place where I always returned to my parents' embrace, to the best food on the planet, to the place where I was always welcome in whatever state I was in, loved no-matter-what. Now, as my mother's passing was imminent and all the people who had nurtured me on that farm— parents, aunts, uncles, and even my oldest sister were gone— I knew that we would have to sell the family house. Suddenly, I was losing my sense of direction. I didn't know where true north was anymore, and I didn't know if I would ever be able to find home again.

I've come to appreciate the fact that there are many definitions for the word "home," and most of them have little or nothing to do with acreage, square footage, the number of bedrooms and bathrooms you have (or don't have), and where your home is located.

The basic definition of home is that place which shelters us from the elements, and especially here, in New England, there is a practical urgency for such a place. As a point of fact, however, having a roof and four walls to shield you from nature does not necessarily take on that form for many people in the world. For many, home might be a tent, a lean-to, a car, a dumpster, or even a box. Yet, while having a place to shelter and protect our bodies is essential to our survival, a "home" offers us (or should offer us) much more than that.

In her book, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, Maya Angelou says, "*The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.*" Well, my mother questioned us, a lot! But I think I understand what Maya Angelou was saying. Home is that place that we long for where judgment is suspended and unconditional love will hold us in our vulnerability and imperfection, where our quirky brilliance can be celebrated and we can be welcomed as we are. **The reality doesn't always measure-up, but the desire always remains.**

This week, millions of Americans will be flocking home for the holidays. It will not necessarily be the home of their birth. It might be a relative's home, or a friend's home, or a church home, or stranger's home, or a shelter that is home. In fact, if you think about it, the word home can take on a much larger meaning. There's our home town, our church home, our home state, our home country, our home continent, and ultimately our earth home. Home is that place to which we belong, for good, bad or indifferent. It is where we are nurtured, where we grow, where we learn the difference between love and lust, between hurt and forgiveness, between right and wrong.

In my personal quest to recalibrate my internal GPS to help me find my true north again, that place where home resonates for me, I found it in the words of novelist Sarah Dessen in her book, What Happened to Goodbye. She said:

"Home wasn't a set house, or a single town on a map. It was wherever the people who loved you were, whenever you were together. Not a place, but a moment, and then another, building on each other like bricks to create a solid shelter that you take with you for your entire life, wherever you may go."

Let me repeat that in present tense:

"Home isn't a set house, or a single town on a map. It is wherever the people who love you are, whenever you are together. Not a place, but a moment, and then another, building on each other like bricks to create a solid shelter that you take with you for your entire life, wherever you may go."

When I think of the many different places I have lived, and the many different people with whom I have broken bread...when I think of all those people who have welcomed me and cared for me...all those moments of homecoming, I realize that I am so blessed to have those memories to shelter my soul. I also realize that I have the capacity to

create those moments for others and with others. When I first arrived here, in the company of strangers, I found another family with whom to share a few moments of my life's journey. And for that I will always be grateful!

Wherever we go, when we bring love and compassion with us, and we welcome each other as we are, no strings attached, then we create homecoming moments. When we welcome the stranger into the abundance of our hearts and from the abundance of our blessings, then we are creating a homecoming moment. When we see those who are suffering and lonely and perhaps homeless, we might not be able to bring them into our physical home, but we can certainly bring them into the home of our hearts and share what we are able, to create a homecoming moment for them. If you think about it, if the earth is our home, then everyone on it is a member of our family.

This Thanksgiving, as you gather around the table of transcendent memories and blessings and pumpkin pie, consider offering a prayer of gratitude for all those people, past and present, who have welcomed you into their hearts. We all need a place to live, but it is the love of people that makes us feel welcomed home.

AMEN and BLESSED BE