

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS
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East Plains United Church - July 17, 2022

Scriptures: Psalm 15, Colossians 1:15-28

Six Sundays ago we celebrated Pentecost. The season after Pentecost spreads across about five months, up until Advent. Then we begin the church liturgical cycle again. Now we are in what is known as Ordinary Time. Although we call it “ordinary” time, it’s not a boring, ordinary time, but rather a time to pause. A time to reflect on the basic elements of our Christian life.

In *The Liturgical Year*, Joan Chittister discusses this Ordinary time, and suggests we now have time to think about the implications of Easter and Pentecost. This time is an opportunity to think more about the meaning of the resurrected Christ. An opportunity to contemplate the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is a time to look at our roots. To examine our lifestyles and daily routines. A time to think more clearly about our spiritual disciplines. Taking time to be contemplative is at the centre of our Christian life. So today, this ordinary Sunday during Ordinary time, we will take some time to contemplate the words of the Psalmist David and the Apostle Paul.

A recurring theme in the psalms is the dwelling place of God and its importance in worship. Some scholars think that Psalm 15 may have been written after David’s second, and successful, attempt to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Mount Zion, where it was housed in a tent. This psalm says nothing of offering sacrifices, which was commonplace practice. But rather, it reminds the Israelites that it is by personal faith they enter into God’s dwelling place.

In the opening verse, the psalmist asks God directly, “Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” David wanted to enjoy the benefits of being a resident in God’s house - enjoying God’s fellowship, protection and provision. It was his desire to be completely with God, to dwell in God’s eternal home. After asking his questions, David goes on to provide the answers. He speaks about the integrity of one’s heart and life that is necessary for those who come to God's house.

In the second verse, three basic areas of life are named: blameless character, righteous conduct, and truthful conversation. All these are applied practically in subsequent verses. It is interesting to note the verbs that David uses: *walk* blamelessly, *do* what is right, *speak* the truth. Blameless doesn’t mean without sin, as none of us are perfect. It has to do with soundness of character. It has to do with having integrity, being committed to the faith, and relying on God. The Psalmist’s list contains both positive and negative qualities. The light and darkness, the joy and sadness, the polarities that exist in life for all of us at all times.

In the middle verses, David applies the principle of honesty to two different areas: asking for money with interest and accepting bribes. Both of these were seen as sinful ways and were preached against by the prophets. The Jews were not permitted to charge other Jews interest, and judges were warned not to accept bribes. Money was not to be used in unjust ways. Just as truth was to be the foundation of all communication.

David concludes this short psalm with the reassurance that, "Those who do these things shall never be moved." The word "moved" comes from a Hebrew word that refers to violent shaking. God's promise is that those who are firmly grounded need not fear. This psalm is not a prescription, but rather a description of how we ought to live in fellowship with God. It poses the question of "who may dwell with God?" It doesn't simply look into the future as to who will dwell with God in the end, but directs us to what it means to dwell with living God now. The psalmist reminds the faithful to strive to do what is right and act in alignment with God's law of love.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are references to preparing for worship and holy dwelling with God. In Exodus 25, verse 8, God called Moses to tell the Israelites to make a sanctuary "so that I may dwell among them." In Exodus 29, verses 45-46, God promises to dwell among the Israelites and be their God, so that they "shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them." Revelation 21, verse 3, says, "See, the home of God is among mortals. [God] will dwell with them; they will be [God's] people, and God will be with them and be their God."

The New Testament scripture from Colossians reads more like a hymn than a narrative. It is thought to probably be based on the Jewish figure Wisdom, also known as Sophia. It uses more elevated, liturgical style prose not typical of Paul's letters. It is unclear whether Paul specifically visited Colossae or whether the church was a result of his work in nearby Ephesus. Some scholars think Colossians may have been written in Paul's name by one of his disciples, either during his lifetime or shortly after his death. While others think it was written by Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome near the end of his life.

The city of Colossae was an important ancient city located about 100 miles from Ephesus in Asia Minor. Paul had travelled through this country on both his second and third missionary journeys. In Colossae there was a mixture of Greek, Jewish and Oriental religions. There was a higher thought, cult-like, philosophy that called for the worship of angels as intermediaries between people and God. Some thought that Jesus could simply be added into this mix of beliefs. But for Paul, Jesus was not to be an add-on. The letter to the Colossians reminded them that Jesus deserved their full and undivided attention! And that he came to liberate not only individuals but all of creation. The way to holiness was not from spiritual pride and actions, but by stripping off all that was contrary to God's will. True wisdom comes not from human philosophies, but rather, rests within the Divine Mystery of God in Christ.

Verse 15 begins with an expression of Christ's supremacy over the cosmos and the church. Through God, and for God, all things in heaven and on earth were created, both the visible and the invisible, the seen and unseen, the things of this world and all things of the Spirit. The next few verses reinforce that God maintains the coherence of the universe.

The letter to the Colossians concludes with a plea to those who were estranged from God, caught up in worldly doings and deeds of the flesh. The writer appeals to the people to focus on their faith and continue their allegiance to Christ. How often do we ask ourselves about the readiness of our heart to worship God? This New Testament passage helps us to understand more about who we are and whose we are, and how we are to dwell with God today. Jesus is the role model for us, the truest example of how to be, as we seek to deepen our relationship with God. The essence of Paul's message is that we are to approach God directly. It is the Christ in us that is our hope of glory. The Christ is our life source and ultimate dwelling place.

House...home...dwelling place... Let's take a closer look at the words and their origins. The word "dwelling" in Hebrew is *shakan*, and from it comes the word *shekinah*, which refers to the "act of dwelling" in God's sanctuary. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* defines a house as a building that serves as living quarters. It explains the phrase "to be at home" to mean: to be among one's people. The word is also used metaphorically to describe the life of the faithful, and the implication that they are at home with God. "Home is where the heart is..." is a familiar proverbial saying. Variations of this have been used since ancient times. This modern wording first appeared in a poem published in 1829 in several U.S. newspapers:

Tis home where e'er the heart is,
Where e'er its loved ones dwell,
In cities, or in cottages,
Throng'd haunts or mossy dell,
The heart's a rover ever...

The phrase has also been attributed to earlier sources, such as in J. J. McCloskey's *Davey Crockett and Other Plays* where it says: "Well, home, they say, is where the heart is..."

The development of the home provides an interesting overview on how we have evolved. In the prehistoric era, trees and caves in the natural environment provided shelter. The first construction was believed to have been made out of stones and tree branches. Ancient Egyptians adapted and improved on these structures with the use of simple tools, and built flat-topped houses made out of sun-dried bricks. Greeks lived in well-made stone houses with slanted roofs that let snow and rain slide off. The Romans further refined these techniques and introduced the concept of central heating, where they laid rows of earthenware pipes under the roofs and floors and ran hot water or air through them. In China, the fundamental feature of any ancient Chinese shelter was its four-sided rectangular enclosure. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages saw the development of fortified castles with water filled moats and drawbridges.

In the 15th century, Europeans began building wooden houses with stone or brick foundations, and wood beam supports. The late Renaissance and Early Industrial Age saw many technological innovations. Glass windows and architectural design began to be the focus. The rate of building increased exponentially as iron and brick became mass produced in factories. In this Contemporary era, the development of steel frames and concrete has allowed us to construct high-rise buildings, and set new standards for construction and architectural ingenuity. So how does this connect with today's message?

Shelter is one of our three most essential necessities, along with food and clothing. Shelter protects us and provides us with a place to rest. But we require more than just a shelter. We need a home. One where we feel comfortable, where we feel loved and cherished, where we feel safe and belong. This is how it is when we dwell in God's home. We are protected, shielded. God's dwelling place is our soul's place of rest. Throughout the evolution of the house, we have been innovative and open to learning, always seeking improvements and refinements.

In an article I recently read from Kenneth Copeland Ministries, they suggest that there are seven habits that we need to be continually working on in order to strengthen and refine our Christian life. First, we need to feed our spirit and nourish our soul. Then secondly, we can build upon our faith by hearing and reflecting on the word of God. Thirdly, as the psalmist reminds us, we are to speak the truth.

The fourth habit asserts that we are to control our thought life. This means we are to maintain an attitude of gratitude. A few years ago I began keeping a gratitude journal. I always start off with a phrase, such as "I am grateful for..." or "Today I give thanks.." and then I put 10 dashes down the page, and commit myself to fill each line with something I'm grateful for. Sometimes it's very simple, like appreciating the purring of my elderly cat. This daily practice helps me to keep a positive attitude. Neuroscientists have discovered that fear and gratitude don't exist in the same parts of the brain. Fear resides in the amygdala, the primitive emotional part of our brain. While feelings of gratitude activate our neocortex center in the front of the brain. This is where our "higher thinking" and more evolved capabilities reside. Research indicates that gratitude actually processes out fear, tames it, and effectively drives it away.

Similarly, habit five reminds us to anchor our hearts through praise. Regardless of whether we are in a time of sadness or are feeling fearful, a spirit of praise helps to keep us aligned with God and produces spiritual resiliency. Habit six requires us to pray in the spirit. Prayer takes us into the unseen realm where God can open doors to revelation, wisdom, instruction and encouragement.

And lastly, habit seven is to get rid of our baggage! That's right, we need to clean out our home, literally and figuratively. We need to declutter our physical spaces, streamline our lives, get rid of anything that is not serving our relationship with God. Imagine watching an Olympic runner trying to round the track and run a race wearing a suit of armour. You'd likely coach him through the TV, saying, "Throw off the armour! It's slowing you down!" Well, that's what God is saying to us. What kind of baggage are you carrying around...worry, anxiety, stress, fear? Whatever it is, make a decision to clean up your house, so that God can transform your inner being.

Imagine a transformed household, a transformed community, a transformed church...a transformed world! For this to happen, change must begin with each of us. Once we begin the process of transforming into Christ's likeness, then we begin to emit the love and radiance of God to others. Our energy becomes changed. We become freed. It is essential for us to be willing to release control and surrender, and develop our own personal prayer practices and daily disciplines.

It is necessary for the soul to walk through dark times to mature. We must die to the parts of ourselves that don't serve God, in order to go deeper into the faith. The saints called these dyings - "the dark nights," or seasons of unknowing and doubt. We are called to trust in God's providence and abiding presence, even in the midst of human evil and suffering. And to remember that we are but a part of the whole, the interrelated whole, and that when one suffers, we all suffer. We are called to come before God, to abide in God's love, to make right choices, and to speak truths. Today's scriptures help us to think about how we are to be faithful and dwell in right relationship with God and one another.

I'd like to close by sharing with you the lyrics of Sherman Edwards and Hal David in their song, "Home Is Where the Heart Is":

And my heart is anywhere you are
Anywhere you are is home
I don't need a mansion on a hill
That overlooks the sea
Anywhere you're with me is home...
Everything that I hold dear
Is close enough to touch
For home is where the heart is
And my heart is anywhere you are
Anywhere you are is home...

We are not alone, we live in God's home. Take to heart the words of the psalmist that, "You shall never be moved!" God's steadfast love sustains all things, in all ways.

So, on the first day of this ordinary week, during Ordinary Time, let us express our appreciation and give thanks to God. The Creator of all dwells with us, here, now, and forever... Hallelujah, and Amen!