

This is my third Sunday back since my four month Sabbatical finished at the end of May, and it has felt good to be back. Like the ancient Hebrew pilgrims, who would have chanted Psalm 122 as we did earlier, I was glad when the American relatives said unto me, “Get thee gone. Go to the house of Nutana Park Mennonite and let your feet stand in their gates for while”. It was good to have been away, but even better to have returned. I am grateful for the many people who helped make my Sabbatical leave possible: Susanne, Helen, Nora, Sarah, the Church Board and the congregation more broadly for your prayers and on-going financial support.

I did a lot of “home work” while on this leave. By “home work” I mean attending to my biological family as well as to my interior world. I even did some work on a home with Mennonite Disaster Service in Puerto Rico with a few others from this community. All this in addition to the home work my wife assigned to me: spring cleaning, garden prep, cooking, dishes, and so forth. Home work, in all its forms, is hard work. In all sincerity, thank God the Sabbatical is done! This morning I hope to describe some of what this Sabbatical has taught me within the context of Pentecost, a holy day on the church calendar which we marked last week.

We do not often note that Pentecost is a homecoming occasion within the biblical narrative. The Pentecost event described in Acts happens on account of two sets of guidelines found in the Hebrew Bible: Leviticus 23:15-22 and Deuteronomy 26:1-10. In Leviticus we hear that this particular festival should take place on the Sabbath seven weeks after the Passover. “Pente” is Greek for 50—7 weeks plus one Sabbath day equals 50 ( $7 \times 7 + 1 = 50$ ), hence the term Pentecost was given to this celebration as the Greek language took hold in the Mediterranean. In Leviticus the gathering is called a “Festival of Weeks” because we have counted off seven weeks from Passover. In Deuteronomy the event is called a “festival of first fruits” and elaborates that it is to happen in Jerusalem with the offerings presented in the Temple. Along with Passover and the festival of Booths (Succoth), Pentecost was one of the three major convocations for the Jews of the first and second Temple eras. All three celebrations had the purpose of drawing the 12 tribes and the Jewish Diaspora back to Jerusalem. As our bulletin cover points out visually, the temple in Jerusalem was a spiritual magnet drawing its children home. In both Leviticus (23:16) and Deuteronomy (26:10) the intent of the festival is to create a venue in which the gifts of new grain or a new crop can be presented as a thank offering to God. In short, the people are coming to Jerusalem to be thankful for Divine presence, providence, and provisions.

Knowing the background of the events detailed in Deuteronomy and Leviticus sensitizes us to several dramatic reversals in the Acts account. The Parthians, Medes and other sundry Jews arrive in Jerusalem to present their gifts to God, but it is God who imparts on them a truly amazing gift. The Temple has been understood as the dwelling place for God’s name (Dt 26:10) and now each person branded with a tongue of fire bears God’s name. The Temple rooted in time and space has now become portable. The faithful have trekked to the Temple, their spiritual home, and they return to the places from whence they came with their spiritual home having been implanted within them. They have come to Jerusalem as pilgrims, and they leave town as evangelists. In the Deuteronomy liturgy the people have described themselves as wandering Arameans, but through the fire of the Holy Spirit these exiles and aliens are being forged into communities of belonging regardless of their national status. Jerusalem, and the temple in particular, has drawn them from all languages, and now all nations will share a common dialect in the Spirit. It is story in which definitions of home are broadened if not altered completely.

Shortly after arriving at my parent’s acreage in Kansas I learned that they had intentions of gifting me a short term membership in the YWCA just up the road. They did this knowing it

would be the only way to keep me sane over the next 6 weeks. (On a side note, the treatment worked, partially. I did go a bit crazy, but not full blown insanity; at least that is what I tell myself). It was my practice to ride with my parents to the gym but walk home the mile or two following a more complete routine. A retired professor of mine from Bethel College and I got to talking while we walked laps. It was cold day for Kansans, probably close -15 (brrrrr I said rather sarcastically because that week in Saskatoon the lows were around -40). Near the conclusion of our visit the prof said to me, "I hear from your parents that you are planning to walk home." I looked at him completely shocked, "walk home? You must be joking; it is way too far to walk home"<sup>1</sup>, I said this thinking he must be crazy to suggest I am journeying on foot back to Saskatoon at the end of my Sabbatical (50 days at 30 mls per day). That comment killed the conversation. Only later that I realized he meant "home" in the sense of my parent's house.

Pondering this miscommunication helped me learn something about myself. I didn't **go home** to the states. I didn't **go home** to visit my parents and family. Certainly biological or adoptive families represent something homelike on account of domestic connections, but I didn't **go home** on my Sabbatical. I went to the place my brothers and parents live to spend time with family. I **came home** to Saskatchewan. I **came home** to Nutana Park Mennonite Church. I **came home** to friends and my spiritual family here. Home for me is not the people I am from or the places I have lived previously; home is where I have a residence plus a spiritual family.

Novelist Pico Iyer has an excellent reflection on "What is home" located on the "TED Talks" website. If you are intrigued by the various ways in which home is defined and redefined I have included the web address in my sermon notes.<sup>2</sup> I offer one quote from that presentation: "for more and more of us home has less to do with a piece of soil and more to do with a piece of soul...home is what we carry around inside of us." This takes me to another reflection on `home` which has roots within our scripture text and I rediscovered on my Sabbatical.

God is our home. The tongues of fire descend on each person anointed by the Spirit. The temple has shifted from "out there" to "in here". In the words of Paul spoken at the Areopagus, which is a phrase found within Stoic philosophy, God is "the one in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Paul would have understood this differently than the Stoics<sup>3</sup>, but it is clear that Paul wanted the Athenians to understand the beautiful concept of the in-dwelling Spirit of God who loves us into the best of ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

G.K. Chesterton eventually became a renowned Christian apologist during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he did not start out as such. A deeply moral person without religious connections, Chesterton authored a book entitled *Heretics* after which a reader sent a challenge that Chesterton clarify himself. So G.K. "set out to define his own religion, only to realize that a definition already existed in the creeds of Christianity. He compared this discovery to the embarrassment of an English yachtsman who miscalculated his course and 'discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas...I am that man in a yacht. I discovered England'".<sup>5</sup> We set sail seeking God. We make detailed charts. We follow the program. Often times we find land, we find God, only to realize that we have arrived at the port

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<sup>1</sup> It is roughly 1500 miles from Saskatoon to Newton, Ks; 50 days at 30 miles would yield the 1500 miles.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ayer\\_where\\_is\\_home?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_where_is_home?language=en)

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Wall, "Book of Acts" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, volume X (Nashville, TN; Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Note here 1<sup>st</sup> Cor 6:19: Do you not know your bodies are the Sanctuary / Temple of God?" as well as the gospel accounts of the cloth barrier being rent asunder as Jesus dies on the cross. Access to the Temple has changed.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publish Company, 1997), p.236.

from which we set sail. Even more striking, we realize that God was with us all along. For some the journey is necessary to find a way back to our spiritual home, to recognize ``the one in whom we live and move and have our being`` is alongside and within. God is our home. In my time away I rediscovered, again, the God in whom I live and move and have my being.

One of the books entrusted to me for my Sabbatical reading is entitled, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*.<sup>6</sup> This book reminded me of the power of praying through the rhythms of creation. On average I was walking 8-10 miles a day, and weather permitting, mostly out of doors. This book rekindled my awareness that our prayers can easily be linked to the seasons around us. For example, there were times I was walking through spaces emerging with Spring, and I found myself praying for a renewal of my ministry for this next stint at NPMC. As I walk these days I am mindful of the drought all around us and the places of drought within me, and these recognitions guide my prayers.

While hiking on the Canadian Shield part of the Bruce trail in Ontario, I found myself amazed that trees could actually grow on the mass of rock beneath our feet (the mass of rock hurting my feet!). Over the generations trees and shrubs have died, decomposed and become the soil from which the young trees might grow. I am nearing 50 and I found myself considering a few of the questions of the second half of life: how shall I spend the remainder of my productive years, what does it mean create an environment in which the new generation can take root, and so forth. These are not the kinds of questions I have had time or emotional space to ponder; this was a gift of the Sabbatical.

The books I read also pointed me in the direction of rediscovering the God who dwells within me and animates my pastoral work. All told I read over a dozen books, and most of those invited me to deeper reflection on topics such as personal spirituality, leadership, and peacemaking. I will not bore us with listing them, but suffice it to say that books are an important way for us to recover a sense of God's presence in our lives and our world. If reading is not your cup of tea, consider an audio book.

My last section of the sermon addresses avenues of discipleship emerging from the Pentecost text. After all the excitement, these newly anointed Cappadocian's and Elamites return to their respective countries. They do so with a new experience of the indwelling Spirit. Out of this Divine encounter they proceed to foster Spiritual home renewal and repair. Renewal and Repair is what God's temple, God's Spirit, desires.

At a personal level we each need to reflect on the status of spiritual house. As I mentioned in the children's time, we all do well in a house cleaning now and then. This is not something to be hired out; it is what we do. There are habits we each can employ which will keep our spiritual home in good condition. Personally, I am committed to several hours of walking a day. I say this because I have a renewed sense that this is how I pray best. Walking is the space in which I offer up my failures as well as my hopes-- I pray well when I walk. So I need to keep walking. This is how I am attempting to keep my spiritual home in reasonable shape. How about for you? How do you tap into the Spirit which seeks to give new life? If you want further conversation on this point either Susanne or I would be happy to visit. This has been a point on personal piety; Pentecost, however, goes beyond the individual. It is social.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:16-17 Paul insists that the Corinthian congregation is the temple of God. He says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells within you?" And the "you" here is plural. We, the church, are the new temple. Believe it or not, we the group known as NPMC, are the Temple God has commissioned to receive the gifts and grief

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<sup>6</sup> J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

of God's children. I offer two concrete examples of what this understanding of being the temple might mean. One of the books I read while on Sabbatical was Stanley Hauerwas' *Naming the Silence*. In the section on being present with those who are grieving a loss—loss of function, loss of a loved one, loss of employment—he writes what has been important for him in such circumstance: “what I need to hear from is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench”.<sup>7</sup> We the temple are consecrated to bring healing to a hurting world, and this might mean sitting, and listening, and simply being present.

My second example comes from my Sabbatical travels. I attended worship in various congregations while away. In one of these Sunday services a well meaning person (who I later learned was the pastor) came up to me and said “I don't think I know your name.” A bit sardonically and uncharitably I replied, “Well it seems we have something in common because I don't think I know your name.” The assumption of the pastor, most pastors, is that others might know who she or he is, but it felt all wrong that I should know the pastor as a guest to the worship service. I think we, the Temple of God, can do better. When new people come to visit this temple we can make a point of introducing ourselves and being hospitable. This can be a challenge because we do not always recognize visitors not to mention that some weeks we just want to connect with our friends. Still, the way in which others come to own a bit of the Spirit present in and among us will be through personal interaction. And this is the opportunity which is present to us all, not just the pastors. There is also a social implication to Pentecost and God's temple being redistributed.

Housing First is an interesting connection to the redistribution of the temple. Housing First is a relatively recent innovation in human service programs and social policy regarding treatment of people who are homeless. It is an alternative to a system of emergency shelters / transitional housing programs. The Housing First approach is based on the premise that stable housing is essential to addressing other issues facing an individual or family; things like addictions, mental health treatment, family issues, and such. In contrast, many other programs operate from a model of “housing readiness” which requires a person get their act together before being entitled to a housing option. Sometimes, most times, we struggle to get our act together without the stability of safe shelter. Housing First has had success in places like San Francisco and Calgary, and if it works there it could surely work here as well. It is, in some respects, the way in which I saw Mennonite Disaster Service serving in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of hurricane Maria, but that will need to be a story for another time.

I conclude with affirming that we all benefit from a stable home. A safe shelter on the one hand, yes, but also that sense of home being the stuff of our souls. Too many people in our world have cluttered souls, spiritual homes which are in disarray or in disintegration. Too many people struggle getting some of the spiritual stuff sorted because they have no residence or a safe residence. Personally, I am grateful to have made it home for Pentecost—having had space to rediscover the in-dwelling God in my life through Sabbatical reading and reflection as well as having returned to a people and place from whom I gain spiritual energy. I wish for everyone such a homecoming. May God use us, the temple of God, to bring Pentecost home to ourselves, this community and the people of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silence*, p. 151.