

First Christian Church
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Summer 2009 *Indispensible Wit(h)nesses*
We All Need a Place
Mark 1: 35-39

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Mark 1:35-38

As we have journeyed through Leonard Sweet’s indispensable people, we have come to a tricky point. Rather than discuss the with-ness of this topic, I think today is more about with-in-ness than with-ness. I say that because today’s topic is place. Everyone needs a place. We all need a grounding center, a point of home and landing.

I have to admit that I’ve struggled with the biblical idea that we have to have a place; we have to have a Jerusalem. As I prayed and studied in preparation for this sermon I couldn’t help but think that Jerusalem was destroyed. The Visionaries class has spent the last 6 months studying and journeying through the Old Testament and one common message throughout the many stories and years of multiple exiles is that we all long for a place, but often times we don’t get to dwell there for very long. The hopeful message in this however, is that we long for something that we know truly exists. We long for a place, for home where our bodies get to rest, our thoughts are heard, and our spirits are known. This longing is not a fantasy, or even a dream. We long for those things that we know. We long for

those things that are imprinted upon our hearts – and we know of this because of places we have encountered God. We know this exists because we all have encountered places set apart – places where we truly dwell within God.

As embodied creatures we are truly satisfied and content when we are housed within our places of comfort. We all know that sometimes our houses don't always feel like homes, our world doesn't always feel restful, nor do our jobs or our relationships. Yet you know that we still long for a place "where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment."¹

As we find this longing for a place, for home within our beloved biblical story, we also see contemporary version of this. I think the biggest hit TV shows of the last few years were largely a success because they built upon this longing. Cheers opens with the lyric "Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name." The song continues singing about this place where you are known is not a place for troubles to melt away, but rather you find out that you are not alone in your troubles. This bar scene of misfits and rejects wasn't a fantasy land it was full blown reality; yet this reality was comforting, refreshing, humorous and playful, and honest. This was a place of hospitality where no matter your story you were welcomed. The current generation grew up on the one hit wonder's Rembrandt's theme song from Friends. Clapping their way through the opening sequence we're reminded of the many ways your day could go wrong, but the ultimate comfort is your friends saying, "I'll be there for you." These places, these people are vital to our

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Longing for Home* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 7

sense of being home, being comforted, being known and valued. They are not an escape from our reality, but rather are spaces that make reality peaceful and meaningful.

We all need a place and people to remind of these things. These reminders offer us rest when we are weary, encouragement when we feel defeated; but most of all, these places are reminders that we are never astray from the most comforting source of all. One of the 20th centuries most well known theologians Paul Tillich coined a phrase that is so very fitting for our reflection upon place. He claims that God is the ground of our very being; that “there is no place to which we could flee from God which is outside God.”² Our very being, the part of ourselves that we wish to be known and celebrated by our loved ones is in fact that source of all being – this source is God. And so as we strive to find ways to reconnect with God, as we strive to find a place that feels like home, we begin to realize that we can access that source in all things and through all things.

We are not in a shortage of finding places to access God, to access and nurture this deep being that we share with God and one another. What we are in shortage of, however, are spaces where our deepest sense of self can fully resonate within the deepest being of the world, and that is God. We all can have access to God in any way and any time we desire; yet we continually find ways and excuses not to do this. What we need is a place that stirs within us the ultimate ringing of this being that we can't help but stop and listen to the sound of our own heart singing.

² Sermon by Paul Tillich – Escape From God on Psalm 139 from “The Shaking of the Foundations”

We are grounded in God, and we know we have found our place when we find that ground upon which God and we truly intersect.

This place is our home for it is where we encounter God. It is where we do not have to try to be ourselves, or make ourselves known or seen – we just are. Theologian Jurgen Moltman states, “I am at home where people know me, and where I find recognition without having to struggle for it.”³ As the biblical story shares the reality of how allusive this sense of home can be, it also strikes that grounding cord within us all. We all have a need to simply be within God. We so often pray fantastic prayers of being the hands and feet of Christ within the world; yet we so often forget that we need also to take comfort within God. We are within the greatest source of being. We are within the dynamic growing life that is abundantly evident all around us and we don’t even have to try or struggle for this with-in-ness. We’re always apart and within our God. We are always grounded and at home within God.

In preparation for our Fall Poverty series I’ve been reading the book *Beyond Homelessness*. In this text the authors identify 8 definitions for home. A home is a place of permanence and consistency. It is a place that is storied with memory and people. It is a safe place to rest and to belong. But what I think is also most powerful is that a home is a place of hospitality. The authors claim, “Home is a kind of hospice, a welcoming and caring abode for those – that is, all of us – who are terminally ill.”⁴ Our terminal illness is whatever is keeping us from fully dwelling

³ Jurgen Moltman, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 46

⁴ Steven Bouma-Prediger & Brian J. Walsh *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p. 60

within the life of God. As Christ began his ministry during the dark hours of the early morning, we can remember that we too can take a rest within God. This most hospitable place is one of comfort, rest, and peace for us all. Yet just as it is the most inviting and welcoming place for us to experience hospitality, this is also the place from which we leave so as to share this hospitality with others.

This description of home, yet also a sending forth is part of the reason why most people I know find this place at church camp. Kaleo is most definitely one of my places. It is a place where I am filled with God and then capable of working and living with others. It is a storied place where my deepest and truest friendships were established. It is true radical hospitality when you are beneath the openness of a sky that only the prairie can fully capture. Beneath these cloudscapes or awesome displays of natural fireworks through lightening storms miles away you can't help but feel you are within the presence of God. The prairie grass reminds me that I can be fully rooted and grounded into God; while then also open to this immense sky of possibilities that life holds. Being so firmly rooted into and held by God, I then know that I can weather any storm and bask in the joyous birdsong and sunshine that life contains. Sweet claims "every plant grows in two opposite directions at the same time: downward, more rooted and bound, clinging to the ground; but also upward, freer and more open, swaying in the breeze."⁵ Our lives are a constant balance between being rooted into our places, and traveling to new places.

⁵ Leonard Sweet, *11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without* (David C. Cook, 2008), p. 199

If these encounters of being grounded into God were all I experienced at Kaleo I would be satisfied; but thankfully, God is not fully content with this. Jesus instructed his disciples after finding him secluded in his place of prayer' "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ⁶ We come to our places of refuge within God to rest and to learn about who we are, so that we might leave this place to continue our work. This is the work of God, and work within God. We come to our places to encounter God, so that we might travel from those spaces to search and work for God in new ways and ventures.

So where is your place of comfort, rest, hospitality, but also a sending forth? Your place not only speaks to you and feeds you what you most need, but it also then empowers you to do so for others. While his ministry was one of continual travel and resting in a variety of homes, Jesus found many times to visit his place apart from it all to rest within God. Our lives are filled with many things that can make us feel separated or apart from God; yet thankfully God has certain places to remind us that we are not apart from God, but rather, we are all a part of our God. Thanks be to God.

⁶ Mark 1:38 NRSV