

Episcopal Address 2024  
I Corinthians 13:1-7,13

When you go and look up “home” on the internet, let me just prepare you—you’re gonna get lots of hits. At the top, you’ll have a bunch of signs for sale on Etsy, with heartwarming words written in swirly script for you to hang in your kitchen. “It’s good to be home.” “Make yourself at home.” “May your journey always lead you home.” And, “Snuggle up.” There were quotes from a Habitat for Humanity homeowner and from realtors. And then there are the home quotes from literature—one list quoted everybody from Maya Angelou to Confucius to Winnie the Pooh. I think my favorite was Winnie the Pooh, who said: “Well, y’see, we keep looking for home, but we keep finding this pit, so I just thought that if we looked for this pit, we might find home.”

The fact that there are so many different expressions of this theme means it’s important. Across culture, across history, home is an idea that resonates deeply. It’s about where we came from, the circumstances and influences that shaped us as children. It’s about the landscape our eyes and hearts find familiar, whether delta or mountain, forest or river. It’s about people we love or now miss, the food they cooked for us, the wisdom they taught us, the rest they gave us, the welcome and forgiveness they offered us, even when we didn’t deserve it.

Home is also about what we choose as adults, to the degree that we’re able. Where we live, which people we surround ourselves with and make part of

our everyday lives; whether we cook and entertain a social life in our house, or keep it more as a private place—these are choices we make if we can, to build a life that looks like us. Some of us also know what it means to try to find home in a place or a situation that you would not choose but don't have the power or resources to change. A place that's falling down or isn't safe. A place where you're hurt by the ones who are supposed to love and care for you. We know that sometimes you have to leave home to find or save your life. Even Jesus had a complicated relationship with his hometown folk.

The point is, all of this runs deep. The thought of home can feel elusive, like we can never quite reach it. Yet it also engages and reflects who we are, the innermost part of us, our values and personality, our dislikes and joy. And I believe all the plaques and quotes are pointing at the fact that the ideal of home, whether the home we have or the one we yearn for, is the place where we are seen, and known, and loved. You and I as Christians profess that this kind of knowing, this kind of yearning can only be fully met in the love of God. The love and affirmation of our home folks can go a long way toward filling up our hearts. But finally, the yearning for home is the yearning for God. Saint Augustine didn't speak the word "home," but he described it all the same: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

So it is that we came to claim the theme, Finding Home, for this annual conference. Much of the reporting you will hear in these three days will be about ways we as United Methodists work to find our home in God, as well as how we

invite others to find their home in God, too. You're going to hear about a veritable explosion of laity stepping up to be trained and to serve as leaders in our church. We'll learn about ways we can move outreach ministries toward real friendship with the people we serve. We'll talk about new resources that will help us engage with new people. We'll hear about children, youth, and young adults, growing as disciples; and we'll learn how we can care better for God's good earth. We'll meet missionaries and hear about mission teams and institutions that expand our connection. And we'll work on the sustainable administration of our common ministry as an annual conference. All of that is about building a context, a home of sorts, where people of faith can learn and grow in Jesus Christ, and where we can serve in his name, which helps us learn and grow even further.

I'd like to talk about one other aspect of home as we experience it as an annual conference—the way we find home in one another. As you heard from the delegate panel earlier today, a lot happened at our long-awaited General Conference in Charlotte. One of the changes made, as you know, was to remove the incompatibility language and the restrictions on ministry with and by gay and lesbian people in our church. It feels like an awkward thing to speak into this room today the fact that we are not of one mind on the changes made at General Conference, but of course it's the truth. There are people here today and in our churches who didn't want the Discipline to change and who now are determining where or whether they fit into this new reality. That's a legitimate and faithful response to the changes happening in our family.

Meanwhile, there are others of us who for the first time feel fully known and loved by their church. The tears and singing and flood of emotions that happened in Charlotte as a result of this vote came from a very deep place and were a long time coming. Many of us that day held the memory of beautiful servants of God who died before seeing the door open to their covenant love or their service in ministry. I've heard multiple stories here in Arkansas of faithful United Methodists who have long served the ministries of their local congregation, sung in worship, prayed for others, written checks, invited new people to church, showed up for decades, but only now have felt free to share their full identity, as gay or lesbian Christians. After all these years, to finally be fully seen in the place they call home and where they have invested and been faithful to God, has meant the world.

These changes have opened doors to new people, too, in Arkansas churches south and north, urban and rural, people who would not have come to a church before but now are coming to ours, where our clergy and our laity are helping them meet the living Christ, face to face. So the shift we are experiencing invites us to consider how we will welcome and entertain one another in our differences. It gives us the chance to choose what kind of Christian home we're going to maintain, for ourselves and others. Because the fact is that our differences in this moment, combined with or even inspired by forces in the world around us, could easily entice us away from each other.

This environment that pushes us apart reminds me of a ride at Six Flags, back when I was a kid, called the Spindletop. It apparently was discontinued in 1989, which was apparently when they figured out that it wasn't safe. If you're old like me, you'll remember that you and a bunch of other people would file into a big cylinder and stand against the wall. Then the cylinder would start to spin. It would go faster and faster, and finally the centrifugal force would push you out and plaster you to the wall. Then finally, the floor would drop out, and there you would hang—face, hair, clothes, all pushed outward by the pressure.

(1) This is what it looked like, well before 1989. (2) These rides have been around for a while. (3) As I looked online for photos from Six Flags, I actually found some of what seems to be a similar ride in Sydney, Australia, called The Rotor. (4) On this ride, people would file in and stand around a center pole. What I haven't been able to figure out is how they get from here—(5) to here. You'll note they're flung out along the wall of the cylinder, but their feet are still on the floor. Then it's a big jump to here. (6) I also found a photo of spectators, (7) people who are glad not to participate but instead get to watch other people get spun out. And, of course, you have to end up here (8), where we can clearly see how a ride like this might end up getting discontinued. (leave slide up)

So, a couple of things.

One is to note that once the ride is in full gear, even if you wanted to stand in the middle, around that center pole, even if you could hang on and withstand

the pressure flinging you away from the person across from you, you wouldn't be able to, because the floor drops out. There is no place to stand.

Another thing to note is that while the ride in this last picture looks fun, we all know that headache and vomiting are likely to result if it goes on too long. We are not built for this kind of ride. (close slide) I don't know about you, but I am tired of being flung away from other people. I am grieved by the ways we fling ourselves away from others. I'll be honest and say that I understand why we do that, why we section ourselves off. Sometimes, as I've said, you have to separate yourself for protection, to find or save your life. Sometimes it just gives you comfort and lowers your overall stress. But in these days of so much division, where meanness and cynicism and attack are somehow acceptable forms of social discourse, and cutoff can feel like a moral act of separation from evil—in that context, I believe God is calling us, the United Methodist Church, to be people who stand in the middle. Not with no opinions, not with wishy-washy values or principles, not with no heritage or Christian belief. But standing on the firm floor of our conviction that love, in the economy of God, is more valuable than perspective. Even if your opinions are correct, even if your reading of the scriptures is right, even if your belief is without blemish—it is love that brings life, love that works miracles, love that brings salvation to the human heart, love that can make a way out of no way.

I Corinthians 13:1-7,13

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and

understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ...now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Sounds like home to me. Sounds like the place that every person yearns for. Sounds like a place, a way, a table, that Jesus Christ invites us to make and to keep, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as his church. Because the stakes are high, for far too many of this world's people. When you define home as love, the number of homeless people in the world is higher than any of us can count.

This is the opportunity God has seen fit to grant to us, all mixed up in the middle of what we don't know. Some of you in this room, and others in your churches are still deciding whether this denomination is the right place for you to live out your life of faith. As you discern, all I would ask is that you reflect on the preciousness of the gift that God has given us, as we have made home and been home for each other, even in disagreement. Remember how you have loved the people in your church, and how they have loved you. I beg you not to regard these relationships lightly, for they have been Christ's handiwork and Christ's gift to you. We know home changes over time; there's no way for it to stay the same in every way. But the knowing, the seeing, the loving—these must continue, as our divine work of home making and home keeping. If you want to be a part of that

work, there will always be a place for you and who you are in this conference and in this church.

For those of us who do trust that we are in the right place, this is a time of immense possibility. The fact that our institution is smaller means it's time to experiment with new ways of connecting and leveraging our resources. The fact that the culture doesn't always understand or value the church, and vice-versa, means we get to try new ways to communicate the good news of the gospel with new people. The fact that we are surrounded by people who are spun out and strung out, who are weary and heavy-laden, who wonder if the pit they keep finding is actually home, means we get to invite them to stand with us and with Christ, to rest on solid ground and find peace. The fact that too many people have heard that the way they were made is not precious in the sight of God means we get to be the ones who tell them they are beloved. The fact that it's Juneteenth, and the injustice suffered by Black people that we remember today also continues as a current legacy means we get to step up behind and alongside courageous Black people to build a new legacy of justice, what love looks like in public. And the fact that tornadoes rip up people's actual homes means that I've been thinking about learning how to use a chainsaw—y'all, this is our time!

You are some hospitable people. I've seen it over and over. So reach across the divide, in Jesus' name. Paint a sign to hang above your table. Piece together a quilt, to warm a neighbor. Make somebody's favorite food. Teach the

children, and tell them they're awesome. Welcome the teenager's friend from school. Pray good things for the cousin who gets on your last nerve and the uncle who always talks politics. Let them tell tales on you from back when you did stupid things.

Remember where you came from. Trust where Christ is leading us, together. And to the glory of God, may we commit ourselves to helping other people find home.

