

## **SERMON: No Place Like Home**

May 13, 2007 (Mother's Day)

Delivered by Rev. Nancy Wilson

Hicksville United Methodist Church, Hicksville, New York



TEXT: Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 16

Hicksville United Methodist Church, in this location, this building, is the same age as I am. My parents attended the very first service in this building, Palm Sunday 1950, about four months before I was born. So I first attended church, this church, in my mother's womb.

My brother Dave and I were talking the other evening about how we knew every nook and cranny in this big church building, with all of its classrooms, corners and staircases. We reminisced about all the basketball games, volleyball games, church dinners, and scout meetings that took place in this church.

In 6th of 7th grade, I started to feel this sense of calling to ministry, and I begged Mary Lou Blackwood, our Director of Religious Education (in that day, that's what women did who were not really encouraged to become pastors) to let me teach 4th grade. She had an opening, and couldn't fill it. I pleaded and begged her to let me teach, but she would have none of it. Finally, in desperation, she said I could teach 4th grade if I could find an adult to sit in the classroom with me. My mother was already teaching, so I asked her friend, Mrs. Vivian Havenor, if she would sit in my class, which she did for three years. She repeated the 4th grade for three years! She never felt comfortable teaching, but this was something she could do to help me and the church. She was my best student, really. What a great gift she gave me!

I thank God for so many teachers and families that were a part of this church and our lives in those days. I will never forget the Sunday that our high school Sunday School teacher invited Mr. Oike to share with us. He was the father of church friends of my brother, and he and his wife helped with church, and with scouting -- you name it. He came that day to tell us of a terrible time in their lives. As a young married couple, they were forced to leave their homes in California and live in an interment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II. Having never heard about this in my history class in high school, I was shocked and horrified. But Mr. Oike talked about forgiveness, and about letting go of the past, and his love for his church and country. I was in awe of him and his wife.

My brothers and I bought our Christmas gifts every year from the church's annual Women's Bazaar, and our families just traded all our cast away stuff, it seemed. Mrs. Mae Biser and I counted the 9:45 AM Sunday School offering at the little desk under the stairway to the social hall. She had a great giggle! Over the years, I sang in three of the five choirs conducted by Richard Bean. It was to Associate Pastor Nick Nappi that I first confided my thoughts that I might be called to ministry, and he took me seriously.

I loved Cranston Clayton's preaching, and what an honor is it today to sit in his seat and to preach from the same pulpit he preached from! He had that Tennessee drawl, but was always quick to let you know he was not a fundamentalist (for Northerner's in those days, that was a stereotype we had of Southerners). He preached Biblically-based, challenging social gospel sermons from his own lectionary.

I was never so proud as when he and Mr. Nappi went to the March on Washington in 1963, to hear Dr. King, when I was 13. He was not perfect, though. When I came to tell him about my calling, he told me that theological education was wasted on women (probably because his daughters went to seminary and then married ministers). I asked him if he knew any women ministers, and he did know one. I asked him for her address and to his credit he gave it to me.

When he took in members, Clayton would say, "This is not the only church; and it may not be the best church; but it's a pretty good church, and we hope you will be at home here." I have stolen that line many times myself over the years.

Our theme today is about "home."

In the reading from Acts 16, Lydia opens her heart and home to Paul and Silas, and to the gospel of Jesus. She welcomes these strangers and her home becomes the meeting place of the first church in Europe.

The Book of Revelation, Chapter 21, speaks of a heavenly vision! Eugene Peterson's translation says that "God has moved into the neighborhood, making a home with men and women..."

John, in the 14th chapter, from Jesus' farewell speech, speaks of God's mansions, in which there is plenty of room for each of us. That home in eternity starts here and now, as Jesus says, "if anyone loves me, God and I will make our home in them." What wonderful examples and promises for us.

There are three things I want to share about "home" today:

1) Home is not a place. Now, it is hard to tell that to folks in Greenburg, Kansas, who just lost their physical homes. But, they did not just lose structures. They lost a way of life, networks of relationships and patterns of living. Home is relationships, it is love. God is love, and where God is, there is home for us.

I am grateful that I grew up in a home where there was love. My parents loved each other, and us, no matter what. Our home was not the building, it was our family and friends. Over the years, I have learned to appreciate the gift of the home I grew up in. So many people have very difficult beginnings in life.

As an adult, I found a spiritual home in Metropolitan Community Churches. MCC was founded by a gay man, Rev. Troy Perry, in 1968. He had been a Pentecostal minister, but when he came out, he lost everything -- his church, his home and family. Finally, he had a spiritual experience in which he felt God telling him that it was okay to be gay, and that he needed to start a church that would faithfully preach the Gospel to and open the doors to everyone, including gays and lesbians.

From that one church in 1968, Metropolitan Community Churches now has hundreds of churches and spiritual outposts in 28 countries around the world. People who were spiritually homeless now have a spiritual home. It has been the joy of my life to serve this church for nearly 35 years as a pastor and Elder.

One of our large churches, MCC New York, not far from here, dedicates the first floor of its building to its food pantry, which feeds 5,000 people a month, and a shelter for homeless gay and lesbian youth. These kids do not just need a safe place to sleep, though they do need that. They need love, relationship and to be valued. This is what MCC New York provides -- a real home.

2) Secondly, the journey is our home! The Bible is full of stories about journeys, exoduses and exiles. Jesus and his family were homeless for a time, refugees in Egypt. As an adult he said, "The Son of Humanity has no where to lay his head." Though he had a home in Nazareth, and some say Capernaum as well, and while he seemed at home in Bethany with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, he was on the road for most of his ministry, dependent on the hospitality of others.

Jesus had a journey with his mother, as well. In the Gospel of Mark Chapter 3, we read that Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters came to look for him. They were worried about his preaching and miracle working, worried for his reputation -- maybe even worried for his safety and sanity. The disciples told him his family was there, but Jesus said, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Those who do the will of my Parent are my mother, and brothers and sisters." There were obviously family tensions in the beginning. But, on the cross, Jesus says to his mother, who is faithful, and who is there with him, "Woman, behold you son, son, behold your mother." He found a new home for her with the Beloved Disciple, redefining home for her, in a new relationships. What a journey they had!

I think of my own journey with my family, with my parents. When I came out, long ago, it was not easy. We struggled a lot. But love kept us communicating, and ultimately my mother said that she knew that if she was not to lose me, she would have to be willing to learn and stretch. It was the relationship that became more important than anything else, and it made the difference.

Following Jesus does not always mean we will be comfortable, or totally "at home." It may mean we leave the comforts of home, are challenged, take risks. Our journey to God is our truest home.

3) Third, there is good news! God wants more than anything to be at home in us, in our hearts and lives in relationships. God yearns to be on the journey with us, for all eternity, and right here and now.

Years ago, when I was pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles, Marlene came to church one Pentecost Sunday. She had been away from the church her whole adult life, and felt quite alienated. But after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she started to feel a need to reach out, spiritually.

Months later, in conversations with Marlene, we discovered that her most positive memory of the Portuguese Catholic Church in she had grown up was of a festival and parade, in which, at age 10, she had played Mary. It turns out that that festival was Pentecost, the same day she had come to MCC for the first time! It's like we have a homing instinct within us that drives us to the place we need to be to re-connect with God and community.

I remember a conversation with Marlene one Sunday evening after church. She stopped me, all smiles, and said, "You know, when I came to MCC, I was looking for two things: to be healed of the cancer, and to re-connect with God and community. If I could only have one (her cancer had metastasized), I am glad that I was able to make that re-connection. Of the two, I got the best one!"

Marlene died just two weeks later. But I will never forget her words that night, and her gratitude for the God who yearned to make a home in her heart.

I want to encourage you, Hicksville United Methodist Church. The neighborhood here in Hicksville has changed a lot from the 1950's and 60's when I was growing up here. We live in very challenging times in our nation and the world. It is not as easy, nor as simple, to be the Church of Jesus Christ here in Hicksville, New York, as it might once have seemed.

I encourage you to keep your hearts and doors, your home, open, to the journey. Keep open to newcomers, strangers, those who will visit your new food pantry that is just opening, your coffee house. Practice the kind of inclusion that will honor your vision and mission.

Continue to be a place where home begins, as it did for me; where God finds a home, where women and men and people of all ages find God and their callings; where God is welcomed into the neighborhood.

Amen.

Sermon Delivered By:

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