

“God’s Home”
Philippians 3:4-7
John 14:16-20,23
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“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ... Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Mother’s Day is fraught with peril. For many, it is a tender time: for those who have lost our mothers in death ... for those who had dreadful mothers, irresponsible, or mean ... for those longed to be mothers and never were blessed to have children ... for those who lost children somewhere along the way, to death, or to estrangement. Mother’s Day is a deeply tender time for many, wrapped in the mantle of sorrow and bittersweet hope.

For others of us, Mother’s Day is simply awkward. As a mother myself, I am colossally aware that I will never match up to the cultural icon of motherhood. One might even ask which version we are supposed to aspire to be. In my own lifetime I’ve seen Mom 1.0, aka Donna Reed variety; Mom 2.0, per Betty Friedan; Mom 3.0, the Supermom/Superwife “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan” model; or most recently, Mom 4.0, the Donna-Reed-with-an-MBA-who-elects-to-stay-home version, also known as “soccer Mom.” It’s exhausting.

For all of these reasons, it is tempting to glide over Mother’s Day, as many preachers do, dismissing it as a Hallmark holiday, to move on to matters theological graver, or at least safer than matters of home and hearth.

Yet home and hearth are deeply theological matters, which all of us instinctually know. From ancient times faith’s locus was first the tribe, not the Temple. So it is no accident then that home and family are exactly the terms Jesus uses to describe God’s presence with us: *“You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you. I will not leave you orphaned. ... Those who love me..., my Father will love, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”* Quite plainly, Jesus says, God’s Spirit takes up residence with us; and God will make his home with us – not only here in “God’s house,” but in our daily lives ... even, literally, in our homes.

The questions raised by Mother’s Day, then, are deeply theological. In what ways do our homes reflect the presence of God? Where in our immediate and extended families do we see signs that the Spirit has moved in with us? If Jesus has become part of our household, how have we made space for him ... and how has his presence changed the way we live from day to day?

Let me say it another way. Every household knows that whenever you add another member of the family, all of the family dynamics change. Although John and I only have one child, Anna, we also hosted an exchange student one year. Not surprisingly, everything changed when Nora moved

in with us for that semester. Our patterns getting ready in the morning changed; she was more talkative than we are used to, and we had to work at being chipper. Our after-school habits changed; both Nora and Annie appropriately needed “Mom-time,” to debrief the day and recount their conversations. Our extended family gatherings changed; not only was Nora included in our holidays, but she was a very attractive sweet young thing, and proved to be a very potent magnet for my nephew to visit more often. Having someone move in with you is no small thing. It changes everything.

So when we invite the Lord to move in with us, we can expect our family patterns change too. Let me focus on just a few.

First, when we welcome God into our home, we appreciate each other more. All of us try to be on good behavior when we’re in public, but our crankiness ratchets up when we can let our hair down at home. One of the marks I see in families that have made room for God to move in is a tendency to treat each other with more respect and kindness and humor. It’s more than tolerance: inviting the Lord pull up a chair is like having a remarkable dinner guest who is able to draw out things from the family that you never would have thought to ask. You see it in newlyweds, don’t you – they listen with rapt interest to one another, anticipating they will hear something new. When we see each other as if through the Lord’s eyes, it’s as if we see our families anew -- with a keener appreciation, and a tender curiosity again.

Second, faith is an everyday thing when God moves in to our homes. Families with young children can’t rely on an hour of Sunday School teach them everything about Jesus ... nor does God-talk only happen within church walls, as if it doesn’t apply to school or friends or daily worries. Today we’re baptizing seven gorgeous babies, and their parents are taking solemn vows to raise their children in a Christian home. The habits they develop in these next few years will be crucial: coming to church, setting a good ethical example, keeping one’s own spiritual disciplines alive. Long after confirmation is over, we keep these habits with us. It takes practice, and it may feel awkward at first, but if you haven’t lately, just start welcoming the Lord’s presence at home by talking to him now and then, listening to what he has to say in Scripture and prayer, and taking his advice to heart.

Third, forgiveness becomes a habit when we know God is near. It’s not that we’re supposed to let our loved ones walk over us – God never calls us to be abused or shamed by our relationships. It’s more that God frees us from being enslaved to our anger. It’s hard to remain bitter and harsh when you’re sitting at table with someone who knows exactly the shenanigans you’ve pulled, the people you’ve hurt, the greed or envy or sloth you’ve cultivated, the wretched ugliness you’ve exhibited when your heart’s been broken ... who knows all that about you, and loves you anyway. That’s what God’s loving, forgiven presence does for us. It is so humbling, it makes it hard to hold a grudge against those who have wronged you.

Fourth, stewardship is a constant practice when God becomes an everyday part of our home life. I don’t just mean giving money to the church. I mean the bigger sense of stewardship: the question of how we use what we have – our money, our time, our intellect, our freedom. Stewardship is at heart the deep knowledge that nothing we have is really our own. It is a gift from

God, to use for God's own purposes. I'm keenly aware that my own child is not my own – she is a child of God, first and foremost, and God has a calling for her that may or may not conform to my dreams and hopes and expectations. My job as a parent is to help my daughter align her gifts with God's agenda ... which I do most of all by modeling that desire in my own life.

I could go on and on, never exhausting the difference God makes. I hope that you'll think of your own family -- the household you live in, your extended family, even your family of faith. In what ways do our homes reflect the presence of God? Where in our families do we see signs that the Spirit has moved in with us? If Jesus has become part of our household, how have we made space for him ... and how has his presence changed the way we live from day to day?

Finally, let me say this. Families that make room for God simply have more joy. Not less sorrow, mind you ... no life is without trials and losses, disappointments and griefs. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians we read this morning says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. The Lord is near." Paul wrote these words not when things were going swimmingly, but while he was sitting in jail, not knowing whether he would see the light of day again. But he is able to urge joy because of the Lord's presence. And so it is with us. When we feel the gracious touch of the Lord, when we know the Lord is near, we are able to focus on the blessings we have received, rather on the fears that may still lie ahead.

And our blessings are abundant, aren't they? I love the hymn we are about to sing – "For the Beauty of the Earth" - it is one of my favorites. "For the joy of human love," it invites us to remember, "brother sister, parent, child, friends on earth and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild, Lord of all, to Thee we raise this, our hymn of grateful praise."

It's Mother's Day, and we are richly blessed. By the beauty of the earth, by friends and family, loved ones near and long past. And most of all, we are blessed by the presence of God, not just here in church, but in our daily lives ... in our very homes. A presence that helps us appreciate each other more, listen and talk to God regularly, forgive each other generously, as we have been forgiven, and align our stewardship of gifts with God's agenda. And beyond all that, God's presence gives us joy ... the joy of knowing God is near, that God has pulled up a chair at our own household's table. Amen.