

Acts 16:11-34
Philippians 1:3-11

A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs Tisdale at the Covenant Network of Presbyterians Conference, Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee, Nov. 4, 2005)

Recently I read a very poignant novel entitled *A Home at the End of the World*. Written by Michael Cunningham, the book tells the story of three single adults—Bobby, Jonathon and Clare—who end up sharing an apartment and a life together in New York City, forging, in the process, a very unconventional family unit.

The two male protagonists in the story—Bobby and Jonathon—had grown up together in Cleveland, Ohio, where they were drawn together in their teenage years by the heartaches and dysfunctions of their respective families of origin. Bobby—who had watched his own parents grieve themselves to death after his older brother died in a tragic accident—longs for the stability of home he finds with Jonathon and Jonathon’s parents, Alice and Ted. Jonathon, on the other hand, is chafing under the wing of an over-protective mother, and a father who cannot come to terms with his son’s emerging gay identity.

The two boys become fast friends, and though they part ways when Jonathon goes off to college and Bobby stays home to work, they meet up again in their mid 20s when Bobby goes to New York to search for a job, and ends up living with Jonathon and his apartment mate Clare. Clare, who is in her late 30s, has also been through some tough family times—including a failed marriage and a string of bad relationships. And so the three—each one lonely and broken in his or her own way—become something of a family to one another. When Clare becomes pregnant and gives birth to a little girl named Rebecca, they all move out of the city, into a little farmhouse near Woodstock, NY, that Clare buys with her inheritance from her grandfather. And it is there that they create together a “home at the end of the world.”

The story is a haunting one, in part because their “home at the end of the world” does not end up being an altogether “happily ever after” one for any of them. It, too, has its fair share of heartache and sadness and pain.

But for me the real haunting of this novel has to do with the way in which it touches upon that deep sense of longing for home that is so prevalent in today’s society, upon the sometimes self-destructive ways in which we humans try to feed that hunger, and also upon the ways in which “family” is being redefined in the world around us.

Unconventional Families Today

Frankly, there is hardly a one of us today who is not touched in some way by the ongoing redefinition of family in today's society. For family, as we are all aware, does not look much like the Cleavers any more.

Whether it is single adults striving to create a sense of home and family among the community of friends with whom they live and work,

Or older adults discovering that their once empty nests are empty no longer;

Whether it is married couples trying to come to terms with their dashed dreams of having biological children of their own,

Or working parents discovering that they are increasingly dependent on people outside of their immediate families to help nurture and care for their children;

Whether it children of divorce, grieving the disintegration of home as they once knew it,

Or same sex couples struggling to create homes in a society that encourages them to be faithful but will not bless their unions,

People these days are struggling with what home means, and how they too might find "a home at the end of the world."

My Unconventional Family

I know that it was in my young adulthood that I first became aware that my own immediate family—which looked for all the world to be about as conventional as they come (a husband, wife, and 2 children)—was not really as conventional as it seemed. For if truth were told, my husband and I could not have survived during our first five years in ministry—when we were serving as co-pastors of four small churches in central Virginia—if we had not had as a part of our own extended family, a wonderful woman of faith named Sandy Hammond, who provided a home and loving care for our two children, Leonora and William, on weekdays while we tended to the needs of our congregations.

Sandy, a deeply committed Southern Baptist with a husband and four boys of her own, lived in a sprawling country farmhouse on a county road that ran between the booming Virginia metropolises of Mineral and Cuckoo. It was there that she welcomed our children each morning to a house heated by a wood stove and to a yard littered with toys and stray cats she had adopted. Sandy excelled in those basic Christian virtues of faith and hope and love, and so it was with grateful hearts that we would take our children to her home each day, knowing that there they would receive the kind of unconditional love and attentive care they so very much needed during those early formative year.

We still laugh in our family about the way in which our daughter, Leonora, who was verbal it seems since birth (one of the hazards I'm sure of having two ministers as parents!) used sit in her car seat and to wave her little arm in a grand sweeping gesture as we drove through the small hamlet of Mineral to get to Sandy's house—which was certainly on the edge of her then-known world—and would say to me in her deep, gravelly 3-year-old voice, "Mommy, ALL THIS is Mineral!" (Mineral, at the time had a population of about 300 people.)

And to this day, when we decorate our Christmas tree each year, we pause when we come to those hand-made ornaments Sandy made for our children when they were toddlers, to reminisce about the good times our children had at her home. Indeed, when the time came for our family to move away from that community to Richmond, where my husband had accepted a call to a new church, I sat on the front porch steps of Sandy's home and wept with her, knowing that in a very real sense, we were taking our children away from one of their rightful parents.

The Unconventional Family of Faith

In the Book of Acts, we learn that the family of faith has, since its beginnings, been rather unconventional as well. And perhaps nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the story we read this morning about the first converts to the Christian Church in Philippi.

Before going to Philippi you may recall that the Apostle Paul had been preaching the Gospel in Asia Minor. But one night he heard God calling him in a dream to go over and preach the Gospel in Macedonia, a Roman Colony in what today is a part of Greece.

And so Paul obediently went. Finding that there was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi—the place he usually went to preach when arriving in a new town—he went down by the riverside to a place of prayer where he found a group of women worshipping and striving to learn more about the God they did not fully understand.

Paul preached the Good News of Jesus Christ to those women. And as a result, one of them named Lydia—a wealthy and evidently single businesswoman who made her living selling purple cloth—asked to be baptized along with her entire household. She, in turn, became one of the founding members of the church at Philippi—one who also regularly opened her home to Paul and the apostles when they visited that area so that they had a home away from home on their missionary journeys.

The second person who was affected by Paul's ministry in Philippi was a young slave girl whose name is not given to us. This girl, according to the scriptures, was possessed by a demon—which probably means that she had some form of mental illness. And because of her condition she was able to make money for her owners by telling the future. When Paul and Silas came to town, she followed them around, heckling them and telling people that *they* were the ones who were possessed, until Paul called the demon within her to come forth. As a result, she was healed, cured of the disease that had bound her. But in the process she also lost her ability to tell the future, and her owners lost their ability to use her to fatten their own pockets. So the owners became furious with the apostles, and had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison.

And that is where we meet the third member of this odd newly emerging family of the Christian faith: the Philippian jailer. This man's job, of course, was to insure that prisoners in his jail remained in their cells and shackles, and I'm sure he was used to dealing with belligerent and bullying types. But when Paul and Silas were thrown in jail, he was confronted with prisoners of a different ilk. For these men didn't resist their chains; nor did they rant and rave and curse at the jailer.

Instead, they held an all-night hymn sing there in the Philippian jail—testifying with joy to the liberating God they knew in Jesus Christ their Lord. And when an earthquake hit Philippi in the middle of the night, opening the prison doors and breaking the prisoner’s chains, the apostles didn’t walk out of jail as they so easily could have. Instead they stayed there with the jailer, prohibiting him from taking his life by sword, and preaching to him the Good News of Jesus and his salvation. As a result, the jailer, too, was unbound, set free by the Gospel of Christ. And he and his entire family were baptized.

An Odd Church Family!

It was an odd family, this church in Philippi, where a wealthy single business woman, a former slave girl, and a jailer who had persecuted Christians came together to break bread and to sing hymns and to create a home at the end of the then-known world. By God’s calling and God’s work, it WAS a family.

And by all indications, it was this particular family of faith that gave Paul his greatest joy in his missionary travels. Indeed, he writes in the opening paragraphs of his letter to the Church at Philippi:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:3-4)

Our Calling: To Be Such a Home

The Christian Church, since its inception, has been called to be a “home at the end of the world” for people who long for a place of belonging and commitment and family. And it is my own belief that the more mobile our society becomes, the more broken our families of origin become, the more fragmented and separated we become from one another, the more we long for such a home.

I know that in my own life there have been many a time when I have said, “What would I do without the church, and the home it provides in an increasingly broken world?”

I grew up in a minister’s family, and in my childhood—when my father was pastor of a small, struggling blue collar congregation, and my parents were struggling mightily to provide for a family of five on a very modest pastor’s income—it was our church family that insured that there were extra gifts for us children under the tree on Christmas morning, an outpouring of grace my brothers and I have never forgotten.

In my adolescent years when I was questioning the faith of my childhood and going through the usual adolescent rebellions against my parents, it was the church that gave me a safe

place in which to wrestle with my questions, and a caring core of Sunday School teachers and youth advisers who took them seriously.

In my young adulthood, as our immediate family moved from place to place, going through the difficult challenge each time of adjusting to a new locale, a new culture—it was the church that provided for us our central place of belonging—opening doors of friendship and welcome we could not have found nearly so quickly elsewhere.

And in more recent years, as my husband and I have encountered those challenges midlife invariably brings—an empty nest, significant job losses and transitions, illnesses, the death of loved ones—it is the Christian church that has wept with us, prayed with us, broken bread with us, and sung the hymns of faith at funerals with us.

The Church: a Dysfunctional Yet Hope-Filled Family

But as we gathered here are most painfully aware, the church has not always been such a welcoming haven for all. For the church, too, is sinful and broken and often displays far more of the world's dysfunctions than it should. Like any extended family, the family of faith is beset by infighting and infidelity, by prejudice and betrayals of trust, by disappointments and dashed dreams.

My seminary theology professor, a staunch Calvinist if there ever was one, used to talk frequently about the “persistence of sin in the life of the redeemed,” and we know that reality for *it is within us*. As the apostle Paul reminds the Philippians, the good work that God has begun in us will not be fully complete until the day of the Lord—that day when Christ comes again and takes us all to our eternal home.

But Paul also knows that within the church a very great and powerful work of God has already begun. It is not our work; it is God's work in our midst.

And because of God's presence and God's work in our midst, on our better days we also find here in the church something of that home for which we so hunger and long:

A healing space, where we can name and confront our own demons, even as we draw near to the God who has the power to cast them out;

A community of belief, where each individual has a unique story to share about God's liberating work in his or her life;

A family of care and commitment, where our joys are multiplied and our sorrows are divided,

And a home at the end of the world, where the completely undeserved grace and love of Jesus Christ poured out for us all, are as lavish as piled up presents under the tree on Christmas morning.

All Saints Day

This past Tuesday the church of Christ around the world celebrated All Saints Day: a day on which we are invited to pause and to give thanks for all those saints who have been family to us, but who have now gone to their eternal home in heaven with God.

Like many of you, I have a whole gallery of saints—some from my immediate family, and some from my extended family of faith--for whom I give thanks this week:

For my grandparents, Ruth and Sarah and James, who meant so much to me in my own childhood—despite the fact that my grandfather never did come to terms with the fact that I, a woman, became an ordained minister, and left the Presbyterian Church after reunion for the PCA;

For my father-in-law, William Alfred Tisdale, Sr. (better known as Sleepy), who used to sit on the next-to-last row in the Mayesville, S. C. Presbyterian Church—now an ARP Church—singing the hymns in a strong tenor voice, and who died only a few months after the birth of our son, who also bears his name;

For my high school friend Dottie, who was like a sister to me throughout my teenage, and who died way too young,

And for Sandy Hammond, who went to her own eternal home at the very young age of 39 after losing her battle with breast cancer. When my husband and I got word that Sandy was dying—just a few short years after we had moved to Richmond--we made a trip out to the country; to visit with her one last time at her home, intending to be good pastors to her. But if truth be told, it was Sandy who ministered to us that day. Telling us of her own deep sadness in leaving her husband and four boys behind, and how especially sad she was she would never get to see or hold her own grandbabies. (For we all knew how Sandy loved babies!) But also telling us of her deep faith in God, and of how since childhood she had longed to know ALL of God, and was finally going to have that chance.

A few years later, when a 10-year-old schoolmate of our children died of a rare disease, our daughter Leonora, said an amazing thing to me that showed me how much she understood about the church as extended family that stretches even beyond this world. “You know Momma,” she said, “I’m just glad that when Travis gets to heaven, he’ll have Sandy Hammond waiting there for him. I know she’ll take good care of him.”

Our Calling

Beloved in Christ, one of these days all of us are going to have that chance to be welcomed to heaven—where our very deepest hungers and longings for home will finally and fully be realized. In that literal “home at the end of this world,” we will be greeted and welcomed by loved ones we have known and lost, and all imperfections in our natures and theirs will be transformed so that we truly become the loving, grace-filled, faithful, and fully healed people God intends us to be.

But in the meantime, God calls us the church, in the midst of our imperfections and our sinfulness, to be strive with all we have within us to be home and family to one another. A home where the broken and wounded and hurting find solace and strength and healing. A family where love and grace abound, and where all God's children are free to fully live out their vocations in Christ. And a place of belonging, in which the liberating Spirit of Christ takes even an eclectic mix of folk like this one, and makes us one.

We cannot create such a home in our own power. It can only happen in through the power of God. But in that power, we too can know with confidence: that *the One who has begun this good work in US will also bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus our Lord.*

To that eternally loving and liberating God be all glory and honor and power forever more. Amen.