

“Home to the spiritually homeless”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Revelation 21:1-6 and John 13:31-35

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Home. As a child, it was our everything. Our world. As a teenager and young adult, all we wanted was to escape it. Become our own person. Only to spend the rest of our lives trying to find it again. Whether the home we had, or the home we never did.

The quest for home is part of who we are. It's Moses and his people crossing deserts. It's seafaring Odysseus trying to return to his wife and son. It's Bilbo Baggins and Frodo, longing for the Shire. It's a grown Peter Pan trying to remember what made him fly in Neverland. It's the relief you feel after a long trip, or a really long and hard day, and you step through those doors. It's Sam Malone behind a bar “where everybody knows your name.”

In practice, home can fall short; it can be a broken and hurtful place. But as an idea, home is our North Star. It's where we are known and loved, a place of memory and identity and purpose, belonging to something bigger than ourselves. It's what a puzzle piece must feel, all jagged and alone, when at last it snaps into place, its corners snug, and it fits, it belongs, it makes sense.

I wonder where you have felt that sense of home. For me, first it was with my parents, and then as a teenager, it was in the woods, as I carried my worn copy of Thoreau and Emerson, and God shined down upon me through the trees, and finally, in a child who made me love with a love I never even knew possible.

The disciples in our brief passage from the Gospel of John today have found that home in Jesus. For generations they have searched, borne on the ancestral memory of other homes found and lost, of temples destroyed, of kingdoms crushed, of people enslaved and exiled. At last, in Jesus, they have found their home, the love that saves them, the purpose that drives them. And now, he's telling them that he's going to leave, and they can't follow. They're going to lose their home again. I wonder if we have ever stopped to fathom the despair they must have felt.

Homeless, again.

We don't need to imagine too hard, do we? We know what it's like to feel homeless, some of us literally, all of us spiritually. To have no place to call your own. No sense of where you belong, of who you are, why you are. It's the fundamental premise of philosophers like Plato and of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians: the pain we feel is estrangement; we have become separated from our source, our home, God. The Bible begins with a story of humanity losing its home in Eden. The people hide from God, so that God can't find them. They come to think of themselves as separate from God. They become wilderness wanderers. And everything they do, from Genesis to Revelation, is about trying to get back there, back to Eden, back home, before the door was shut.

It's why Jesus came—to bring us back. To open the door. To show us, in himself, humanity and divinity—not separate—but as one. And what could accomplish such a home-bringing, you might ask? Jesus tells his disciples. It's love.

Jesus says to love one another. That's how the disciples will find a home in his absence. By loving with his love, they will find home in each other. For to love someone is to see God in them, for God is Love. And to see God in someone is to come home. The God in us sees the God in them, and the pieces are put together. That's the revolution Jesus started.

The Book of Revelation today tells us how the revolution concludes: with a new home, in which the barriers between heaven and earth have vanished, and all tears are wiped away, and all that was once broken is mended. But Jesus' instruction to the disciples tells us we don't have to wait. We can be living reminders of that home today. The church can be a foretaste of home with God, modeling a different way of being in the world, certainly still messy and imperfect but a place of love. A place that shows the world God dwells here.

That's why, after years of prayer, study, and listening to you, your Holy Conversations vision team said that Westminster is “where you're already home.” You're already home, the moment you walk through those doors. This is where you are welcome, where you matter. When we asked you what was most important to you about Westminster, almost everyone first answered: relationships, a feeling of belonging. Everything else you named—from music to our intellect to our community presence to diversity—was an expression of those relational ties.

It is a mighty calling Jesus gives his disciples today—and gives us here at Westminster. To be the home the world is supposed to be. To live out right here the love that finds God in the other.

Last week, we found a sobbing homeless woman on the steps of our church. We gave her sanctuary. And after hours of counseling and coordination, we made sure she had a safe place to call home that night. That same day, we helped an older person who is discovering their transgender identity purchase women's clothes online, so that she can feel at home in her own body.

Just the week before, a small group of parents who had lost children to miscarriage and stillbirth gathered in a circle in a softly lit room here at church to tell their stories—to cry, speak their anger, express their doubts, do whatever they needed, without fear of judgment.

Daniel, I love how every Sunday, you beam a big smile and wave to every person who enters the sanctuary. And I love that when you need help, someone comes to sit beside you and guide you back to the hymn or Scripture reading or prayer.

Every Sunday are lifelong Presbyterians, faithful Catholics, Unitarian friends, evangelicals seeking something more authentic and inclusive, and people who have no idea what they believe but just need a place to belong. We've got single mothers with their children, immigrants, widows, adoptive and foster families, people with disabilities, and people of diverse education and economic status. Most are here—we learned this also through our listening—because they

have experienced great pain and loss in their lives, and they want a place where they can be loved, and love others, out of that shared hurt—and shared hope. They want a gritty, real, intellectually robust faith that is unafraid of the ambiguities and alive to the possibilities of existence.

Throughout the week, Scouts can be heard running through the halls of Westminster, laughing. On Monday, an art club of mostly older women gathers to splash paint on canvas. Teenagers identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary, or questioning join with friends and mentors for a drop-in center, where they can be safe and loved. In the hallway, people search coat racks, while receiving items such as toothpaste, toilet paper, and laundry detergent from our Personal Care Pantry, items that can't be purchased with food stamps. In my study, I talk with someone in need of rental assistance and then a person escaping domestic violence. We hand out bus passes and help an older gentleman pay for his cancer medication. Literacy Volunteers teach English as a Second Language. Three times a week, people meet for Alcoholics Anonymous. Volunteers sit behind open doors at noon for anyone needing sanctuary. Groups meet for Bible study, book discussion, prayer, parenting help, interfaith hikes, and spiritual guidance.

This is who we are at Westminster. We're not a big congregation. We're not nearly as racially diverse or as faith-engaged or as bursting with young people as we wish. Our worship could certainly use more pizzazz. But we are home.

Westminster is home to the spiritually homeless—to the person who is seeking belonging, who craves a more “thinking” faith, who is lonely or grieving, who has disabilities or health challenges or doesn't know how they're going to pay the next month's rent, who craves a church that embraces the playfulness of children and the gifts of older members, whose sexuality or gender identity or relationship status has been shamed elsewhere, whose race or ethnicity rendered them invisible, who just wants a church where they can be fully and authentically themselves.

It's not for everyone. Some people want or need something more comfortable, more homogenous, more certain and doctrinal... maybe even just something more fun. We've had people leave because of our advocacy of racial justice, or because of sermons that tackled hard topics, or because of disruptions in worship due to mental illness. When you throw a bunch of very different people together, disagreements happen; differences may grate or challenge us; we may disappoint each other.

For those, however, who seek a love that goes deep, that stands by you no matter what, that confronts the mysteries (in all their beauty, joy, and sorrow), that empowers you to care for others and be cared for in return, Westminster is home. It's the place where we meet God, not just in an idea or a song or a word on a page, but in each other, in the holy, messy people we have the responsibility and honor of calling our own. **Amen.**