

CHEW ON THIS - reading for discussion
Wednesday, November 16
6pm
Social Hall

by Barbara Brown Taylor

None of Us Is Home Yet

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

MATTHEW 6:26

NOT TOO LONG AGO, I TOOK PART IN THE BLESSING of a friend's home. It was not her home, really. It was a small yellow brick bungalow with a "For Sale" sign in the yard, a house lent to her by the owner while she was between jobs. The real estate agent thought the house would "show" better with someone in it, and my friend was that someone. Unsure how long she would be able to stay, unsure where she would go when the house sold and she had to leave, and fundamentally unsure about her ability to make her own living, she moved her things into the house and invited her friends to supper.

Everyone brought a dish, or a fistful of flowers, or a small gift, and after we had all eaten well we gathered in the living room to begin the celebration. The prayer book we used suggested several readings for the blessing of a home, and out of these we chose two. First we read the story from Genesis about Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers who stopped by his tent under the oaks of Mamre, and after that came a reading from the sixth chapter of Matthew's gospel.

It was somewhat shocking, under the circumstances. We had just gotten our friend settled. We had just put the books onto the shelves and hung the curtains on the windows and lined up the cans in the cupboards. We had just achieved the semblance of a home for her, even though we all knew it was no lasting home, and it would have been nice to hear a gospel lesson that said, in effect, "You are safe now. You have a place to live and everything will be all right now." That is not what it said.

You know what it said. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" The words fell like stones in deep water. No one coughed or cleared a throat as Jesus preached to us, assuming that we believed him, assuming that we took God's providence for granted. He was telling our friend that she *was* safe, but not because she had a roof over her head and a key to the front door. "You are safe," Jesus told her, "because the God who made you will not abandon you. That is your home, which nothing and no one can take away from you."

"Oh," my friend said at the end of the reading. "Oh."

It was a more faithful response than my own. When I hear that passage I generally want to argue, not only for myself but for the whole worried world. "Yes, but. . ." That is what I want to say. "Yes, that is a lovely passage and I really do believe it on some level, but birds do not have bills to pay and lilies do not get arrested for loitering and the grass of the field does not have three children under five to feed and diaper. Yes, God will provide, but meanwhile there are people sleeping between cardboard sheets and eating out of garbage cans who seem to have fallen between the cracks of this passage."

Do not worry? I *do* worry. About the growing number of people in this country who have nowhere to call home, about

the revolution that must take place before that trend will reverse itself, and about how I can know all of that and still enjoy my own home, which is so important to me. My house is much more than my residence. It is my sanctuary, the place where I rest, where I retire beyond the reach of the noisy world, where I am fed. It is where my bed is, and my books and my Great-Aunt Alma's quilts; it is where I bathe and sleep and dream and rise. It is where I invite my friends and where I cook for them. It is where I plant red tulips and where purple finches crowd the feeders outside my windows. It is the place my husband and I have made with and for each other over the past ten years. It is our home.

My home is a promise I make to myself when I get too tired to go on. "You can go home soon," I tell myself, and the knowledge spreads through me like sun on a cold day so that I *can* go on, for a little longer at least. Several months ago I acted on that promise, leaving the church a little before dark after a long, hard day. Looking out into the parking lot I saw my lone car. I also saw Luther, a homeless man who spends his days walking between the big downtown Atlanta churches in shoes that do not fit. He drinks, and he has lung cancer, and he loves churches.

"Hello, Luther," I said. He was sitting in the bushes with a bottle in a paper bag. "Hello, Barbara," he said. I asked him how he was and got the full answer. None of it made much sense, but then the bottle was empty and things never seemed to get any better for Luther. Finally I wearied of his monologue and said, "Luther, I've got to go home now." No sooner had I said it than I regretted it. What a thing to say to someone who did not have one! What an excuse to use with him. The word hung between us for a moment until Luther brushed it aside. "This is my home," he said, waving his arm toward the church. "This is the only home I have."

Home. What a compelling, elusive word that is. What a strong hunger the human heart has for home, and what a hard thing it

is to find and keep a home—not just a building, but a place to belong—a place to *be from* and a place to *go to*. A safe place where one is known and a safe place from which to know the world: a nest, a family, a stable fortress in a vast and often frightening universe.

I had lots of homes, growing up. My family moved eleven times during my first fourteen years; I lived in six different states and went to eight different schools. I left the state where I was born when I was six months old and have never been back. When people ask me where I am from, I hesitate. Shall I lie, or bore them to tears with the truth? "I am not from anywhere, really." That is what I usually say. "We moved a lot."

And I was not alone. We live in a transient society, full of corporate nomads with children who are good at memorizing new addresses and telephone numbers, children who grow up with plenty of houses but no clear sense of home. But it is not necessary to move a lot to lose track of home these days. You can stay put right where you are and still feel the ground shift under your feet.

The neighborhood where you have lived all your life begins to change complexion; property values go way up or way down. Where did home go? The marriage breaks up and the children become commuters, living part-time with each parent. Where did home go? Or your own parents die, and the house you grew up in is taken apart piece by piece. Where did home go?

None of our sanctuaries is invincible. Even the church—the one place that *should* be safe—is subject to the diverse and fractured world in which we live. Brought together by our wish to belong to one family, we sit down around the dinner table and find that we do not agree about what to believe or how to worship or even about who belongs to the family. We confess that there is one head of our household, but our descriptions of who that is bear little resemblance to one another. Where did home go?

For as long as God's people can remember, they have been seeking the way home. "A wandering Aramean was my father. . . ." That is how the story of Israel begins in the book of Deuteronomy, and that is the story every Hebrew learned to repeat when presenting first fruits to the Lord. However settled God's people became, however prosperous they became in their promised land, they were not to forget the long roundabout journey by which they had been delivered there. Wanderers once, they would be wanderers again, but wherever they went they were to remember: their destination was never Egypt or Jerusalem or Babylon but God, always God.

Thousands of years later, Jesus would appear, a messiah with a house but no home. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head," he says in the ninth chapter of Luke (9:58). It is not a complaint; it is the truth. If God is where we came from and God is where we are going, then we have no permanent address and all our shelters along the way are temporary ones. Our houses, our church buildings, our offices—even this lovely old chapel—they are all good places to park ourselves and rest a while, but they are not good places to define ourselves by, or sustain ourselves with, because they do not have that kind of power.

On any given night, however comfortable we may be and however secure our futures may seem, we remain vulnerable to a certain heaviness of heart that can come upon us for no apparent reason at all. It may begin as a flutter in the chest or as a full-blown ache—a sudden hollowness inside, a peculiar melancholy, an inexplicable homesickness. Have you felt it? The sense that there is a place you belong that you have somehow gotten separated from, a place that misses you as much as you miss it and that is calling you to return, only you do not know where or how to get there. All you know is that you are not there yet, and that your life will not be complete until you are.

It is not the best feeling in the world, but it is not the worst either. It is not a bad thing to know you belong somewhere, even if you are not there yet. I like to think of it as God's tug, a kind of homing instinct planted in each one of us that nags at us, and turns us around, and makes us restless when we sit still too long, because none of us is home yet. That is the deep truth. Some of us have houses and some of us do not; all of us stake out various places to be for days, or months, or years, but none of us is home yet.

A wandering Aramean was our father; our Lord had nowhere to lay his head. We have loved him without having seen him, as Saint Peter wrote almost two thousand years ago, and it is truer now than it was then. We have loved him without having seen him, but we mean to see him. We track him, following his fresh prints out of our churches and into the streets, into the projects, into the courts. We track him to all the places where people stand in long lines with pieces of dirty paper folded in their hands, all the places they bend over lengthy application forms with ball-point pens that do not work.

We track him in their faces, which are surprising in their variety. We look for him in the veteran, the widow, the immigrant, the young mother with the crowd of children around her legs. We seek him in the big-shouldered man in the wheelchair, the grandmother with the large flowered bag over her arm, the Native American whose sleek black braid reaches halfway down his back. We follow him by following them home, or following them into all the places they live that are not home for them. When we join them there, it dawns on us that the body of Christ is fundamentally homeless—as strange as it sounds, the only reason he can make his home everywhere is that he calls no place home—and that we who belong to his body are as footloose as our Lord.

What that means for the church is that homelessness is not an "issue" for us that we attend to merely out of social conscience;

it is our primary identity, and when we forget that, we forget who we are and whom we follow. We also, I think, forget how to serve. Ignoring the truth about ourselves, we cling to certain illusions that foul us up and wear us down, turning our service of God into a panicky duel with our own devils.

We cling to the illusion that some of us are blessed and some of us are not, and that it is our job as those who are blessed to rescue those who are not. We labor under the illusion that our work involves “us” and “them,” with us—the caregivers, the helpers, the lucky—on one side of the counter and them—the clients, the supplicants, the unlucky—on the other. We succumb to the illusion that they can all be saved if only we will work enough hours, find enough money, get enough publicity.

We may also cling to our own comforts, more aware than ever how much they matter to us, and we may try to cut deals with God: that if we are allowed to keep what we have then we will double our efforts on behalf of those who have less than we do. Meanwhile we can hardly enjoy what we do have for all the guilt it provokes in us. Shall we cut our own rations to bread and water? Wear sackcloth to work? What shall we do?

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” That is what we shall do. When we forget who we are, our Lord reminds us: we are the people who live by the grace of God alone, by trusting in God’s providence and by remembering that we are more, far more, than what we consume or wear or where we live. We may care for ourselves and we may care for others, but it is God who cares for us all, and none of us is home yet.

If we remember that, our service to others will be as different as our sense of ourselves. There is no “us” or “them” out there, just us—all of us—lined up on the same side of God’s counter.

Some have more than others, but we are all blessed, all called to bless one another, all seeking the way home and finding it in one another’s company. We do not have to wear ourselves out protecting ourselves from the truth—that none of us is home yet, that home is hard to find, that our longing for home is deep and abiding and often very, very painful. We do not have to use up all our energy running from that fact, or running from those who remind us of it.

We can instead choose to serve those among us who are closest to that truth, who live out our homelessness for us in very literal, concrete ways. We can join them in their search for a home, understanding that their search is our own search. We can serve the God who feeds and clothes and shelters by doing some of that ourselves, but always with the knowledge that it is God who provides—no—who *is* our true and only home, in whose household there is plenty—for the birds of the air, for the lilies of the field, and for every one of us.