

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – June 7, 2020

Hymns: This Is Your House; As The Deer

Scripture: Luke 10:38; John 14:23; Acts 5:42; Hebrews 3:1-6

Sermon Title: Where Jesus Feels At Home

Luke 10:38 - As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

John 14:23 - Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

Acts 5:42 - Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house,” bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future.

But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

“Such a beautiful sanctuary. Such beautiful windows, such a beautiful organ, such a beautiful ceiling.” I am used to hearing these things all the time, from visitors off cruise ships, from guests at a wedding, from mourners at a funeral, from first-time folks on a Sunday morning. I heard it from my own lips, when first I visited Zion, during General Assembly in 1996. “Now that’s a church,” I remember saying, little imagining I would be the minister here some ten years later.

One visitor, though, took me by surprise. She and her husband had wandered in while touring the town from their cruise ship. Like everyone else, she was admiring the windows, the organ, the ceiling, while her husband took pictures. “Lovely, just lovely!” she kept saying. And then she said, “I imagine Jesus would feel right at home here.” Which stopped me in my tracks. I’d never thought about whether Jesus would feel right at home at our church. “I certainly hope so,” I said, not entirely sure. The only building Jesus had ever visited as fancy as Zion was the Temple in Jerusalem, and his last visit there didn’t go well at all.

That being said, we often call a church “The House of God.” We sang it in our opening hymn this morning! So I’ve always supposed Jesus would feel right at home here. Wouldn’t he? After all, it is where we, the Family of God, gather in worship and praise. Or rather, where we used to gather for worship and praise. The first line of our opening hymn went, “This is your house, its doors are open wide.” Well, not so wide anymore. For the past 12 weeks, we haven’t been able to be together here at Zion, and probably not for another 12, although I pray we may do so sooner, and certainly not later. And somehow, I don’t think Jesus would feel particularly at home in an empty church.

But that raises the question: if not here, where would Jesus feel at home?

The best place to go for answers about what Jesus thinks or feels is of course the Bible, and the New Testament in particular. And, more particularly yet, the Gospels. What do they say?

We know that while Jesus was born in Bethlehem, from a young age his family had made their home in Nazareth. Nazareth wasn’t a wealthy place. The houses were small, made largely of stone, with three or four rooms. It was a small village, maybe 200 people if that, some farms, an olive press, a synagogue. You’d assume that Jesus felt at home there.

But the day came when the people of Nazareth made Jesus feel very unwelcome indeed, throwing him out of town and almost off a cliff in the process. They were hoping that Jesus, who was gaining some fame as a miracle worker, would shower special favour upon them, the old home crowd. When Jesus told them that they were no

more or less special in God's eyes than anyone else – that God considers all people equally worthy of love – that God loves the *whole* world - their disappointment turned to anger, causing Jesus to say, “*A prophet is honoured everywhere but in his own town and own home.*” So maybe Jesus wouldn't feel at home there anymore.

Leaving Nazareth, Jesus settled twenty kilometres away in Capernaum, on the north shore of the lake called the Sea of Galilee. He ended up living there with Peter's family – with Peter, Peter's brother Andrew, Peter's wife (Mrs. Peter), and his mother-in-law. We aren't told about any children. People got so used to seeing Jesus there that Capernaum became known as Home. We hear, for instance, “*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home (Mark 2:1).*” You can visit what remains of Peter's house to this day; archaeologists have uncovered the foundations, the threshold, the hearth. It would have been bigger than Jesus' Nazareth house, and made of different stone – black basalt versus the golden Nazareth limestone. Four rooms, a kitchen, a courtyard. Nothing fancy. Nothing like this.

Mind you, Capernaum was hit pretty hard by two earthquakes, one in the 300s, one in the 700s. After the first one, Capernaum, a pretty big town of 5000 or so, was rebuilt, with a big new synagogue made of imported white stone; at the same time. Peter's house was incorporated into a large hexagonal church, built right on top of the original home. Later, in the 700s, between the earthquake and the Muslim invasion, Capernaum was abandoned, buried under the soil of time, and only rediscovered a century ago. I love going there, especially standing on the shore and looking out over the Sea of Galilee, which must look much as it did in Jesus' day. But Peter's house? With a big Franciscan church built to hover right over top of the site, looking like a concrete flying saucer, I don't think Jesus would feel at home there anymore either.

Where else? Well, Jesus spent a fair amount of time in synagogues. Perhaps he'd feel at home there. After all, Jesus frequently used synagogues as a base of operation. In the Gospels, we read time and again how, “*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23).*” This makes sense, in that the synagogue was the community hall, the multipurpose meeting room, the schoolhouse, the law court, and the gathering place for the reading of the Torah and the teaching of the Scriptures. “Gathering place” is, in fact, what the word Synagogue means. In the days of Jesus, synagogues in Galilee were quite plain and functional. Stone walls, stone benches, small open windows. It was not in any way a sacred place or a “house of worship;” it would never be called a “sanctuary;” it certainly would never be thought of as a “home,” let alone a “House of God.” There was only one such place, and that was the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Temple was where the Presence of God was thought to dwell. If you wanted to get close to God, the Temple was the place to do it. It was where the sacrifices happened, where the pilgrimages took place, where the High Priest made atonement for the sins of the people. In his youth, Jesus did in fact feel at home at the Temple in Jerusalem; when Mary and Joseph lost track of him during a family pilgrimage, it was, after a frantic few days, in the Temple they found the twelve-year old Jesus. And all he said to his baffled parents was, “*Why did you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I would be in my Father’s house (Luke 2:49)?*” So maybe that’s our answer. Maybe that’s where Jesus would feel at home. Well, maybe at the age of twelve; not so much in his thirties.

Surprisingly, when visiting the Temple in his later years, Jesus wasn’t all fond of the place. He famously said, “*It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’*” And then, just as famously, he went around tipping over the tables of the money changers and dove sellers and supporters of the whole Temple apparatus. Jesus also insisted that as beautiful as the Temple was, it wasn’t going to last: “*Not one stone will be left upon another,*” he said, and less than forty years later, the Romans made sure that prophecy came true.

But something else happened long before the Temple was destroyed. Within the Temple (separating the interior sacred space from the most sacred Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest was to enter, and only once a year) was a huge curtain, theatre-sized, as thick, we are told, as a man’s hand. On one side of the Temple Curtain were the people; on the other side, it was believed, the Holy of Holies side, was the Presence of God. And, the Gospels tell us, at the moment of the death of Jesus on the cross, “*At that very moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51).*” The separation between God and humanity no longer existed. The world itself became the Holy Place of God. The Holy of Holies, an empty room.

So don’t expect Jesus to feel at home there. Especially today, where on the very spot of the former Holy of Holies, what you find is the Muslim Dome of the Rock, around the sides of which, in ornate calligraphy, are inscribed verses from the Quran condemning the belief that Jesus was the Son of God.

So where would Jesus feel at home? Would you believe, in homes?

Here’s a clue. Over and again, much of what happens in the Gospels happens in homes. And not only Peter’s home: Matthew’s home. Zacchaeus’ home. Simon the Pharisee’s home. Lazarus’ home. Any number of unnamed homes. Over and again, what seems to have happened is just like this from Luke (10:38): “*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.*” Simple as that. People opened their homes to Jesus. Had him over for

dinner. Invited him (and his friends) to spend the night. After all, he had no home of his own: *“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head,”* he said (Luke 9:58). So he relied on the hospitality – and homes – of others.

This became such a central part of how things worked, Jesus instructed his disciples to follow the same pattern (Matthew 10:11): *“Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave.”* That’s where to find Jesus or the disciples – in homes. Ordinary homes. Places where people, like Martha, *“opened her home to him.”*

This remained true for the early Christians as well. Those in Jerusalem continued to gather at the Temple, but also in homes (Acts 2:46): *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. (Acts 5:42): Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.*

You see, there were no purpose-built churches, not for hundreds of years. In the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul we read instead of “house churches,” gatherings of Christians in homes:

- *Acts 20:20 - You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.*
- *Colossians 4:15 - Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*
- *1 Corinthians 16:19 - Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

And so on. In fact, it seemed as though the Spirit of God was on the move and changing lives in houses, in homes, more than anywhere else. Here’s but one example among so many; this in the home of a jailer, who asks what he must do to be saved (Acts 16:30-34):

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

It was in homes that the church took root, in houses and among households. Which leads me to this thought: Where would Jesus feel most at home? How about, your house? Would you, like Martha, be prepared to “open your home to him?”

Again: when the Church began, there were no churches, no purpose-built buildings. There wouldn't be for hundreds of years. Christians gathered in homes. The home was considered a sanctuary, a sacred place. God moved in households, through families, in homes. It never occurred to people that God would not be at home in their homes. That's where God was!

Rabbi Dow Marmur of Toronto was asked by a reporter which service of the Jewish year was the most important. “Every Friday evening, as the Sabbath is welcomed into the home, with prayers among the family, is the most important. When God is not worshipped in the home, and only in the synagogues, the faith dies.” In the spirit of that insight, what is the most important prayer we make? The prayer we make at home, recognising that God is a part of our lives, not only in church on Sunday, but in our homes, every day of the year.

And not only in our homes. For where would Jesus most wish to make his home? Well, let's ask him: *Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” John 14:23*

“We will come to them and make our home with them.” This is an amazing thing. Is this the house of God? Or, as Jesus says, are **you** the house of God? Our reading from Hebrews makes it even more clear (Hebrews 3:6 NLT): *Christ, as the Son, is in charge of God's entire house. And we are God's house, if we keep our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ.* Or, as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 3:16 NIV): *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

This is wonderful news. So many people are missing being in church together. Me too! I can't wait until we can be a big happy family of faith, filling the pews once again, laughing and talking as the kids run between our feet in the fellowship hall. But while we can't be in church together, we can nevertheless be THE church together, as together we invite Christ into our hearts and our homes, as we ponder the daily readings, pray the daily prayers, study the Scriptures together, worship along with the Sunday service videos, all in the comfort of our own homes, coffee in hand, and, as many of you have confessed, still in your jammies.

You see, it isn't so much about where church is held. It is much, much more about whether Jesus is welcome there. For where Jesus is welcomed – where we gather

in his name – where we make a place in our hearts – that’s where Jesus feels most at home.

*We will come to them and make our home with them. We are God’s house. You yourselves are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you. Where would Jesus feel most at home? **In your home. In your heart.** Will you open your home, will you open your heart to him? Will you invite him in? Will you make your home, your heart, the House of God? Or will you leave him here? In this big, beautiful, empty place?*

Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into their home and share a meal with them, and they with me. (Revelation 3:20 NET)

Open your home to the presence of Jesus. Open your heart to His Love. And be “filled with joy because you had come to believe in God—you and your whole household.” Amen.