

## *Redemptive Homecoming in a Culture of Dislocation*

Dear Friends,

Simone Weil once said, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” In spite of this yearning of the human soul most people if they were honest with themselves would have to admit that they were detached, unconnected and uncommitted. Zygmunt Bauman describes such people as vagabonds, who blow through life like tumbleweeds without direction. “The vagabond is a pilgrim without a destination: a nomad without an itinerary. The vagabond journeys through an unstructured space; like a wanderer in the desert, who knows only of such traits as are marked with his own footprints, and blown off again by the wind the moment he passes, the vagabond structures the site he happens to occupy at the moment, only to dismantle the structure again as he leaves. Each successive spacing is local and temporary – episodic.”

We live in a culture of dislocation. Deborah Tall describes this culture as one that dictates, “To stay in one place for life is often interpreted as being un-ambitious, unadventurous – a negation of American values. Moving up in the world means moving on.”

I have to confess that I am as much of a product of this culture as anyone. I would often consider it a slow and somewhat unproductive week if I logged less than 1200 miles of road travel that week. At one point I almost became one with the car. This happened after my first wife Penny died and I went for months never spending more than one or two nights in the same bed. I was trying to escape the loneliness, the sense of loss and hopelessness.

Scott Russel Sanders summed up what happened as I became aware of my homeless condition when he said, “Only by knocking against the golden calf of mobility which looms so large and shines so brightly, have I come to realize that it is hallow. Like all idols, it distracts us from the true divinity.” As time passed, I found myself pulling off the road more and more and going on prayer walks. As I would walk through forests, down city streets, through neighborhoods, and parks praying and observing, I found I was not only getting in touch with my surroundings but also myself, my God and other people. Sanders goes on and declares, “It has taken me half a lifetime of searching to realize that the likeliest path to the ultimate ground leads through my local ground. I mean the land itself, with its creeks and rivers, its weather, seasons, stone outcroppings, and all the plants and animals that share it. I cannot have a spirited center without having a geographical one: I cannot live a rounded life without being grounded in a place.”

In our search for redemptive homecoming we must first recognize that we are living in a culture of dislocations. Robert Wirthnow describes this culture of dislocation further by pointing out that, “images of stable dwellings have increasingly been replaced by images of those who have left home: the migrant worker, the exile, the refugee, the drifter, the person who feels alienated or displaced, the person lost in the cosmos, the traveling salesman, the lonesome net surfer, the lonely face in the crowd, the marginal person, the vagrant, the dispossessed or homeless person.”

In contrast to the rootless wandering of the culture of dislocation Bouma-Prediger and Walsh in their book Beyond Homelessness give us the following three steps toward understanding and experiencing redemptive homecoming. “First, if we long for a spirituality of homecoming in which home is a site of radical hospitality, then we need to reflect on the God of Love and the otherness of creation as created and sustained in that Love. Second, if we want to engender a homemaking lifestyle and cultural perspective in which home is most fundamentally received as a gift rather than an autonomous achievement, then we need to reflect on the God of grace and the character of creation as a gift. Third, if we want to engage in a homemaking of shalom in the face of a culture of violence, then we need to reflect on the God of goodness and creation as deeply and fundamentally good... And if we are looking for a Spirituality of homecoming in a culture of dislocation, we need to ask what kind of God, and what kind of a world, would engender such a homecoming.”

I John 4:16 answers by declaring, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in Him.” Over and over in the scriptures we see that God is love.

This God of love whose redemptive work is reflected in John 3:16, 17 is the one who provides for us the opportunity to experience the reality of a redemptive homecoming in a dislocated sin stricken world. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

Jesus is the revelation of God’s love. He invites us to make a home in His love. As Ps. 33:5 says, “The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of His unfailing love.”

Creation is full of the love of God as reflected by the songs of the birds, the beauty of the flowers, the sunset and the sun rise, plus countless other manifestations daily of the glory of God. “How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps 104:24).

Redemptive homemaking is possible because through Christ we become members of God's household. Paul explains it to us this way in Eph 2:17-22, "So He (Jesus) came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through Him both of us have access in one Spirit of the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself as the cornerstone. In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows in to a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God."

Paul is saying we no longer have to be aimless wanderers, exiles dispossessed, lost and lonely. In Christ we are citizens in God's dwelling place. The homecoming has taken place. Now through faith we can enter into it. As this happens our lives are transformed through the Spirit in such a way we become a part of God's Holy temple. This cosmic sanctuary of love is reflected daily in His wonders and beauty of creation, which is only a taste of the eternal glory of heaven which is awaiting those who believe.

Loren Wilkinson, who I had the privilege of studying under in Vancouver British Columbia, says: "Rather than the greatness of God being understood as distancing Creator from Creation, God's greatness is here seen to enable a deeper intimacy of Creator and Creation." J. Richard Middleton declares, "God's love is not only at the root of the divine decision to create the world (why God created) but also describes the most fundamental character of reality (what God created). Creation is wrought by the extravagant generosity of God's love."

It is impossible for us to feel at home anywhere unless we feel loved. Accepting and experiencing the reality of God's love is what opens up our hearts and minds to receive the love of other people. Yet if you or I let the hurts, wounds and disappointments of the past infect us we will feel increasingly alienated, alone, and in many respects homeless. We must accept the reality that the cosmic love of the creator manifested in the wonders of creation and the scriptures can create a tent, a place of homecoming, for our life.

Paul knew what it was to try to live a righteous life only to be rewarded by a culture of dislocation with alienation, persecution and rejection. He summarized redemptive homecoming in Romans 8 when he declared "in all things God works for the good of those who love Him who have been called according to His purpose" (vs. 28). "If God is for us, who can be against us" (vs. 31). "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any

powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vs. 37-39).

All of creation bears witness to God’s desire for us to be at home in His love. Meditate on Psalm 104, 148 and many other places in Scripture, which testify of how God’s love provides a home for all of His creation. As a result Ps 150:6 declares, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”

The opposite of homecoming is homelessness. Hemi Nouven describes our culture of dislocation and displacement as a culture of homelessness. “Probably no word better summarizes the suffering of our time than the word ‘homeless’. It reveals one of our deepest and most painful conditions, the condition of not having a sense of belonging, of not having a place where we can feel safe, cared for, protected and loved.”

Redemptive homecoming is more than just a place. It involves a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, the knowledge we are loved.

In this age of homelessness Jesus offers us a home. “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14:2). Then in John 15:4 Jesus invites us to abide in Him as He abides in us. This abiding in Christ involves living in His house of love. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.” (John 15:9) Remaining in Christ’s shelter of love involves obeying Him when He says, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

It is this love of God flowing through those abiding in Christ’s love, which provides the tangible assistance needed by the homeless and hurting. This love from the NLEC community, my children and other caring Christians sustained me as I tried to come to grips with the loss of Penny and my dad during 2007. It enabled me to love even in the midst of my hurts and to move on and marry my present wife Debra in 2009. I am beginning to see more clearly that as a Christian sojourner on this journey of life I am to praise God for the homemaking of the past, live in the present and look forward to the homecoming in the future with Christ for all eternity.

Living in the home of the present, I am learning, involves living in the now. This means I must strive to abide every moment in the love of Christ and share that love with others. Abiding in the now involves extending hospitality. Hebrews 13:1, 2 says, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Christine Pohl in her book, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition defines hospitality as “transcending social and ethnic difference

by sharing meals, homes, and worship with persons of different backgrounds.” During New Life Evangelistic Center’s first year of operation this involved opening the Fifty-foot trailer we resided in. Then as the years passed we housed the homeless in a large old house NLEC had in the Central City, then a former YWCA building and a host of other facilities. Now as my wife Debra and I find ourselves living in a small one-bedroom home I find that most of our personal hospitality is extended directly through one of our shelters and the trainees we are privileged to include in our lives.

Extending hospitality is a part of the journey that you and I are on as we abide in the redemptive homecoming of God’s love. As we daily move forward we find our hearts longing for that day when we will hear that loud voice saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3, 4).

This redemptive homecoming is possible as we put our faith and trust in the resurrected Christ who tells us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In My Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1-3).

There are so many things that can upset and trouble us at this time. Scott Russell Sanders writes, “The young people who put their disturbing questions to me have had an ecological education, and a political one as well. They know we are in trouble. Everywhere they look they see ruined landscapes and ravaged communities and broken people. So they are asking me if I believe we have the resources for healing the wounds, for mending the breaks. They are asking me if I live in hope.”

Jesus not only says yes we have hope, but He goes on and challenges us to live in the hope that He has proven exists as He rose from the dead. Now He tells us we can experience the hope of a redemptive homecoming as we trust in God and trust in Him. N.T. Wright challenges us to open our eyes and reflect on all the signs of hope we see in creation. He says these signs, “are not the evidences of an evolution from lower to higher forms of life, or from one ethical or political system to another, but the signs built into the created order itself: music, the birth of a baby, the appearance of spring flowers, grass growing through concrete, the irrepressibility of human love. Some parts of our world simply point beyond themselves and say, ‘Look! Despite all there is hope.’” It is that hope that Christ has provided for us.

“The heart of the Christian gospel is the message that we all are homeless, but that there is a home in which our yearning hearts can and will find rest. That home is creation redeemed and transfigured, a place of grace that is inhabited by an indwelling God of unfathomable love. The Christian gospel, in other words, is a grand story of redemptive homecoming that is at the same time grateful homemaking.” This statement by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh sum up what it means to experience redemptive homecoming in a culture of dislocation.

The choice now belongs to each and every one of us. With yearning hearts and restless anxious spirits we can try to find peace, security in a job, another person, or this special thing be it a house, a car, or a big screen TV. The problem is they will never satisfy us. So we can continue searching, drifting like tumble weeds across the terrain of life in a culture of dislocation. We know in the depths of our soul there has to be something better, something secure, someone in this vast universe we can turn to and find peace, hope and ultimately a home.

If you listen carefully you can hear Him inviting you to participate in a Homecoming far above and beyond your wildest dreams. Are you able to stop drifting long enough to let His still small voice invite you home as He says, “Come to me all of you who are worn out as a result of your homelessness and I will give you a home in my presence and peace”?

I know that as I have responded to that invitation I have experienced a peace, a sense of belonging and purpose that passes all understanding. I wish I could tell you I was constantly abiding in His presence and experiencing the satisfaction of being at home. The fact is I must admit that I often let anxiety, fear and worry drive me back out into the streets of loneliness and discouragement. But thank God for the Holy Spirit who awakens me to my need to return home. Such a return takes place as I pray and meditate upon God’s Word and works, letting an attitude of gratitude sweep over me.

As a sojourner passing through this life, I long for that day when I will be with my Heavenly Father at home for all eternity. Thank God this is possible for all of us through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. His resurrection provides a home coming for those who turn to Him. Now is the time for each of us to experience Christ’s redemptive homecoming in this culture of dislocation. Just tell Him you are tired of wandering homeless through life and that you want to come home to Him now. As you do this, experience His peace, power and purpose that passes all understanding.

Yours in Christ Service,

Larry Rice