

A Place of One's Own?

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost,

July 19, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 2 Samuel 7.1-14a,
Psalm 89,
Ephesians 2.11-22,
Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

If you've ever talked to an incoming college freshmen the month before they leave for college you've seen the kind of glint in the eye that comes when they talk about moving into the dorms and starting the adventure of independence. Never mind that this independence will likely be forged in a 10x10 square room shared with a total stranger...there is just something good about spreading your wings, leaving home, and finding your own way in the world. The novelty of that kind of adventure wears off somewhere around the sixth time you've packed and unpacked that dorm room as you move in and out over the course of those years. Talk to a weary grad student or someone retiring from the mission field - anyone who has moved from place to place more times than they count or who has been on the road or lived in borrowed space - talk to them after they've moved the last box into a home they intend to live in for the duration....and you will see an equal delight in finally putting down some roots and having a place to call home again.

In the story of the Israelites, having a place to call their own has been a central part of God's covenant with them. In our text today there is a divine recognition of the deep need of the human soul to find a place of one's own: "And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place and be disturbed no more..."¹ It makes sense that David would feel some dissonance as he experiences this blessing of place and permanence while the ark of God's covenant - the symbol of God's presence - still resides in a tent that can be moved from place to place. As we've talked about at several points in reading the stories of David, there is a complex mix of political commentary, personal ambition, and divine intention that goes into these narratives as we have them. It may be true on one level that God gave them this place but Lynn was exactly right last week in describing the political motivations that led David to establish Jerusalem as the center of his kingdom and to bring the Ark of the Covenant to that place. So when David takes it upon himself to create a permanent temple, he is quickly put into his place and told that he will not have the honor of creating a house for God

¹ 2 Samuel 7.10

It may be interesting to think about the mixed motivations that may have lived side by side in David, but there is something more significant in this text for us today. In this prophetic explanation Nathan identifies the danger inherent in believing that God can be limited to one place built by human hands. Foreshadowed in this prophecy is the downside to the very human drive to find and cultivate a place that feels like home...and then to call that place God's home as well. Think about all the violence that has ensued as people protect the place they perceive to be their own. The very promise of covenant to create of David a house...a lineage...a nation leads to the divisions that the writer of Ephesians protests.

The gift of place and land becomes a real curse when it turns into a kind of nationalism and religious exclusivity that becomes so deeply entrenched that anyone who is not from the house of David is viewed with suspicion. By the time Ephesians is written the separation between those who are Jews (the circumcised) and those who are Gentiles (the uncircumcised) is so rigid that they view each other with a mutual disregard, distrust, and resentment. Just to keep some perspective, though, Christians do the very same thing. A few short centuries later Charlemagne as leader of the Roman Empire has to be convinced by Alcuin of Turs (an English monk and deacon and the author of our prayer of confession today) to stop baptizing pagans under threat of death.² It is clear that we all continue to cultivate in subtle and sometimes blatant ways a real hostility toward those who are different from us - people we perceive to be outside of the place that we call home. The writer of Ephesians insists that this tendency to protect what is one's own (whether that be land, religion, or way of life) leads to hostility and division and it betrays the One who gave us those very gifts.

Isn't that part of what offends God in David's decision to build a temple? It's the presumption that David's place belonged to him alone - that he was the one who secured it - the he would be the one who would then secure a place for God. Part of what Nathan says to him is "don't be foolish and think that all this has come to you because of your skill and fortitude - it is a gift from God." When we forget that - when we protect what is our own as if it belongs exclusively to us for our own enjoyment - we risk creating the divisions that lead to the hostility that Christ came to overcome.

There's a quote from John Calvin in the most recent issue of the *Church Herald* that is very instructive on this point. It says: "All the blessings we enjoy are Divine deposits, committed to our trust on this condition, that they be dispersed for the benefit of our neighbors."³ It affirms two things when you bring Calvin's assertion into conversation with our texts today. First, it **IS** good for the soul to have a place to call home. And I

² Needham, Dr. N.R., *Two Thousand Years of Christ's Power, Part Two: The Middle Ages*, Grace Publications, 2000, page 52.

³ *The Church Herald*, July/August 2009 issue, pg. 4.

mean much more here than a house. I mean all the things we receive and places we create to rest and rejuvenate and enjoy the relationships and blessings of life.

Jesus seeks out a place like that for him and his disciples in the gospel text we read for today. In this case it is not a permanent place but a temporary one to rest and recover and re-create all that energy that led the disciples out on their very first missionary endeavor.⁴ But the second thing Calvin points out is also reflected in the passage from Mark. A place to call home is not really a place of one's own. It might be your place but it is not just **FOR** you. It is for the good of our neighbors that we have these gifts. So when Jesus who is on the way to that place sees the clamoring needs of the crowd he sets aside (for a moment) what is good for him and for his disciples and offers to share with the crowds the gifts God has entrusted to him.

First of all Jesus sees them. I'll grant you that it is probably hard to miss a crowd of people chasing you along the sea shore. But Jesus does more than notice their presence. That alone is worth mentioning since so many of us walk around with blinders on; thinking only about what is right in front of us or caught up in our own thoughts rehearsing our personal concerns. When in that mode, we hardly notice people at all. When Jesus looks at the crowd he does more than merely notice them. He looks beyond the surface of things. He sees that they are a like sheep without a shepherd. He sees to the heart and is moved with compassion by the need that he find there. He shares his time, his wisdom. He gives to them knowledge and inspiration. He motivates this profound generosity among them (the feeding of the 5,000 comes in the middle of the passage we read here). So they share in a meal that prefigures this table to which we are now called.

As we come, let us come celebrating all of the places we call home...
all the relationships where we can be ourselves
all of the work that stimulates our creativity
all of the time we have to connect with the
abundant blessings of this world

As we come, let us also consider the ways these gifts can be shared. Not out of a sense of duty or obligation but with a spirit of curiosity and excitement as we keep our eyes open for the ways these gifts are committed to our trust to be enjoyed for the good of our souls and also for the good of our world.

Amen.

⁴ See the passage in Mark 6.6-13. The disciples are sent by Jesus in pairs to proclaim the good news. They are just coming back from that experience when our text begins today.