

Finding a Home for the Soul

Psalm 84; Luke 19:9-14

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Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church

Grand Rapids MI

After hurricane Ian had passed over Deerfield Beach Florida Ronald began to clean up his yard of debris, moving it to a nearby field. Ronald and his wife Jane are retired and decided to wait out the storm because they lived on high ground. They only experienced minor flooding while other parts of the area did not fair so well.

As Ronald was moving back and forth with his tractor, he noticed four little children standing on the edge of the woods across the field. He went over to them and asked “where did you come from, where are your parents?” The oldest said that they thought they died in the storm. So, Ronald invited the kids to come to his house and they would take care of them.

The four children were wet, hungry, and cold. Ronald and Jane were moved with such love and compassion hearing the harrowing experience the children had endured. Their mother had gone out to work just before the storm and never came home. Out of fear, as the waters rose the kids fled the home.

The next day one of the kids asked Ronald “why don’t you yell at us or hit us?” Shocked Ronald said, “we don’t do that here, I don’t hit people.” Ronald shared how he too was raised in an abusive home and did not believe it was right for anyone to do that. Then the kids began to open up more and began to share the abusive home they had come from. Again, Ronald and Jane wept and hugged the children promising that they would never be abused or hungry ever again. Ronald was not sure what would come next, but they vowed that they would get a lawyer and petition the courts to keep the children if need be. They were heartbroken to know that these kids had experienced so much trauma in their young lives. Ronald is 82 and Jane 78 and

probably would not see the kids grow up. Still, they were ready to do whatever was needed to keep those kids safe and provide a loving home for them.

Ronald first shared this story with some relief workers handing out food and water in town. The next day one of the kids remembered the phone number of a grandparent and with the help of the local police they were able to reunite the children with their extended family. The mother had in fact been swept away in the floodwaters trying to get back home.

Have you ever lost your home? Or had to flee a dangerous situation? Do you know of people whose home life is not peaceful and loving, but traumatic, abusive, or neglectful? If you were raised in a loving and caring home, it can be shocking to hear of such abuse. We all believe that the home should be a place of love and nurture. We believe that it is best when children are raised in healthy, safe, and loving environments and yet we know that abuse does happen, and it breaks our hearts.

I am proud that East Church has a long history supporting Family Promise and other ministries like it who help families. So much of our unhoused population is because of people fleeing unsafe home environments. According to one statistic, approximately 63% of homeless women have been victims of domestic violence. By the age of 12, 83% of homeless children have experienced violence. According to a recent study from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, LGBTQ young people are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth. Up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.

What is most disturbing about this last statistic is that this increased rate is often because their family has either kicked them out or made living at home unbearable because the child is suspected or shared, they are LGBTQ. We call that religious trauma. When religion is used to justify hatred, rejection, or abuse in the name of God.

So, when I hear the words of the Psalmist today say,

My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord;

Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts.

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

I hear the voices of people who struggle with religious trauma. I hear the voices of people especially young people who were raised in the church and remember the stories of God's unfailing love. They learned how Jesus is the good shepherd caring for the lost sheep. They remember the songs of praise that gave them a deeper sense of God's presence.

But somewhere along the way that message of love was corrupted or betrayed by others who use the bible to justify their own prejudices and to judge others rather than love the outcast. We hear Jesus point this out in today's parable. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector are found in God's House. The first person was busy pointing out the failings of others and holding others in contempt, feeling morally superior. While the tax collector, who is deemed unholy by the society at large still longs to be in God's courtyards. He stands on the edges of the community silently praying for God's grace. It is just them and God. No one else matters. While others like the Pharisee look down on them and call them a sinner and a danger to the community. Jesus says that God answers their prayer and sends them home forgiven and justified, not the self-righteous pharisee.

You see the struggles of finding authentic faith was present in Jesus' day and still exists today. We are seeing once again a mass exodus from all sorts of religious communities because of religious trauma. More and more people are looking at organized religion and are seeing too many self-righteous people pointing at others and blaming them for all that we see is wrong in the world, failing to look within to see how they can be better people themselves.

These are the spiritual things I wrestle with. How can I be a better, more loving person and spiritual leader so that anyone, and I mean ANYONE coming through coming here or meeting me on the street feels more at home spiritually. Today people continue to

ask, how can we grow the church. I get it. We love the church and we want it to continue. But I tell you that you are focusing on the wrong question. The right question is what makes a church an authentic spiritual community? Jesus never seemed to worry much about the size of his crowds, so why are we.

I encourage all of us to listen to the spiritually wounded voices around us, especially of those that others have labeled as the cause for the mass exodus from churches.

One of those voices who has written extensively on the spiritual struggles of Millennials Rachel Held Evens in her book *Searching for Sunday*. She starts the book off with this quote from Pope Francis:

“I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets. Rather than a church which is unhealthy, from being confined and from clinging to its own security. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security. Within rules that make us harsh judges. Within habits which make us feel safe. While at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire in saying, “Give them something to eat.”

There are a lot of hungry, cold and hurting people, both physically and spiritually, in our world. Wouldn't it be nice if they find someone like Ronald and Jane, who's hearts of compassion are so deep that they will do just about anything to heal those memories and show them what a loving home should look like.

This is the kind of church we need to invest in as we work to be more loving and compassionate toward one another so that more will find a home for their soul here with us.