

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*Baptism of the Lord*  
Hebrews:11:1, 8-16

### **Our Heart's True Home**

Last year at this time I did something I don't do very often. I made a New Year's Resolution. It had to do with our plans to go on sabbatical in the fall. And I was serious enough about this resolution that I told people about it—I made it public. You might laugh when you hear what it was—it doesn't sound very spiritual. It hardly fits what someone might expect of a minister preparing for a once-in-a-lifetime, 4-month period of reflection and renewal in ministry, an extraordinary experience in a faraway land. No, my resolution was quite mundane. I vowed to clean our house before we left in September.

It was, in fact, an 8-month process. Each room was assigned a month, and I started with the closets. My motivation, of course, was that we had promised that someone else could live there, and what was then 11 years of accumulated clutter and some enormous dust bunnies were aspects of my life I didn't want to share! I was seeking to avoid embarrassment. I was seeking also to be hospitable, to provide a welcoming, temporary home for whoever would temporarily serve this wonderful congregation.

Last week when we returned, I saw the results of my labor in a fresh light. Yes, there were still some piles which I never got to and that Linda had to look at, or ignore. But "home" looked pretty good to me. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, the snow was white, someone else had recently cleaned and it felt like our house was welcoming us back. Back home, that is. For a while at least, our travels were over.

A year ago at this time, this church was also making a New Year's resolution. It wasn't nearly as specific as cleaning the house in 8 months. It was broad and really, rather undefined. But it was public. It was named "The Journey of Renewal," and in a sense, it was proposed as a "housecleaning" to welcome the Spirit of God to blow fresh ideas and energy into the church's ministry. It was a year-long process which isn't over yet. It included a consultation and retreat with one of the denomination's most experienced church renewal experts, Stan Wood. Remember that? It included a serendipitous weekend visit from the moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Joan Gray. Do you remember that? She graced us with her gentleness and wisdom and deep faith and led us in a service of renewal of our baptism. The journey included serious reflection and discussions in many arenas of our congregation, which intensified in adult Sunday School in the fall and began to take some focus in a hospitality work group which is still hard at work implementing new ways of being a welcoming congregation. A place which feels like home for weary travelers, strangers and sojourners.

The spiritual life has always been described as a journey, with a destination called home. For Abraham and Sarah, the journey was a literal one, a leaving of the home they knew in obedience to a call from God, traveling to an unknown destination. For Moses and the Hebrew people who were slaves in Egypt, the journey meant a difficult path in an inhospitable wilderness, one which strained their faith that God's promise would ever be fulfilled. For pilgrims who traveled to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, whose traveling songs are part of our book of Psalms, the reward was a cleansed heart and deepened spiritual connection, for their physical journey was also intentionally a spiritual one. And

the experience of the disciples of Jesus, which was a journey around Palestine, a journey toward Jerusalem and the cross, set the image deeply into the Christian consciousness. The earliest form of church was certainly not a building, nor even a settled group of people. To follow Christ was to belong to “The Way.” We are people of the Way.

But even as people of the Way, we long for and travel towards a place to call home. It didn’t take long in September for Dan and Martha and me to become weary travelers, in search of a place to call home. And while back here in Bozeman this congregation was examining its practices of hospitality, the ways it helps others feel at home, we needed to receive hospitality. We found our home away from home at the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland.

Corrymeela is first of all a place—a small piece of land and a few buildings on the rugged North Antrim coast, on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and Rathlin Island and, if you walk a few hundred yards down the road, the western reaches of Scotland. Corrymeela is also a dispersed Christian community, about 150 people who are committed to living their Christian faith by working for peace and reconciliation wherever they are. And thirdly, Corrymeela is also a lived community, the volunteers and staff who live and work together day by day, carrying out the work of hosting groups who come to the Centre seeking peace.

The first sign which greets visitors at Corrymeela is the welcome sign at the entrance to the car park. (that’s what they call a parking lot.) The round sign reads “Corrymeela is a community of Christians committed to peace and reconciliation. A safe place for all for encounter, meeting and dialogue.” It’s a sign which announces Corrymeela’s purpose..

The second sign of hospitality is a personalized one if you’ve let the staff know that you are coming. A colorful handmade poster is mounted in the doorway of the large, light-filled reception area. When we saw our sign, we knew they were glad to have us arrive. It read “WELCOME, JODY, DAN, AND MARTHA McDEVITT” (I suppose they understood the Irish surname better than the German one!) And within a few minutes of our arrival, we had met and been introduced to and welcomed by nearly all the senior staff, who all happened to walk through the reception area. It doesn’t always work out that beautifully, but it did for us.

But even if you are coming without notice, as a drop-in guest, you get just as warm a welcome. There’s always someone at the reception desk to say “hello, I’m glad you’re here today, how can I help you, would you like to sit down and have a cup of tea?” There’s always someone assigned and available to give a “tour and talk”—and another cup of tea as well as a scone or a piece of toast or a biscuit. It never feels like an interruption of someone’s work, for their work is hospitality, and every guest is important.

We felt immediately at home in the 2-bedroom townhouse they gave us to live in, and in the dining room where we ate most of our meals with the other volunteers, the staff, and the ever-changing guests who were staying at Corrymeela. For most guests, Corrymeela is home for just a few days at a time. For the three of us, Corrymeela was our home for three months.

It is in that homey, welcoming atmosphere that people feel God's grace and peace touching their lives, giving them hope for their journey. It is in that welcoming space, the open Christian community, that healing happens.

As you are probably aware, Northern Ireland has been a land of conflict, frequently open and violent conflict, since the late 1960s. The violence has diminished significantly in recent years with a peace process and an emerging political process. But the very nature of the conflict means that there are many people in that small country whose lives have been affected by violence. Over the decades, Corrymeela has been a healing place for many of these people.

I want to share a story about that. While we were there this fall, one particular group from Belfast came to Corrymeela for an annual weekend. The group is known as VAST—which stands for Victims And Survivors of Trauma. That weekend it included 3 generations of families, many of whom were related to one another—children, their mums, and their grannies. The three of us were on the team hosting this particular group. We had a great time with them, especially with the children. The mums and grannies had some facilitated sessions while we helped provide activities for the children. It was a lot of fun. And I have to say that I could see no outward signs that these families were victims or survivors of trauma. They were strong, caring families who looked out for one another.

But I learned that there might be more than meets the eye at the end of the weekend when it was time for the group to board the bus and return to Belfast. There was a lot of chaos as suitcases were brought to the lobby and things were forgotten in the bedrooms and children were protesting that they didn't want to leave. Amid all this confusion, a woman who appeared to be the most elderly in the group was smiling as she sat on a couch and watched. She and I had not had any conversation up to that point, simply because we never had been at the same table at meals and I was usually playing with the children in the free time. She had sometimes used a wheelchair, and never been neglected, but I hadn't talked with her. But in this goodbye time, she waved me over to her, and offered her thanks for the good weekend.

Now, they speak English in Northern Ireland, but it isn't always understandable to those of us who aren't completely accustomed to the accent. And she had an accent, compounded by the fact that she didn't have all her teeth, so I wasn't completely confident that I was understanding everything she was saying. But she was clear as could be when she said to me, "My husband was shot dead 16 years ago." Caught by surprise, I said I was sorry, but that wasn't what she was seeking. She wanted to tell me more. "Since that happened, I never go out of my house anymore," she said. "Except when I come to Corrymeela." She smiled, and then she ever so slightly moved her cheek toward me and said, "Give me a wee kiss." So I did.

In that unexpected moment of intimacy, her thanks which turned into a sharing of the deepest recesses of her soul and an invitation to bless one another, she really wasn't thanking me, I knew that. She was thanking the dozens of volunteers and staff and community members who over the 16 years of her grief have helped her to feel safe in the world again. I was the honored recipient of her gratitude. After that, I took every opportunity to share her words with those whose labors for peace and healing in Northern Ireland have been much more long-suffering and committed than mine. I was reminded of one of my favorite quotations: "What a privilege we have been given by God to be able to

spend our lives giving his love away.” (Don Lessin) And I knew in an indelible way that Corrymeela’s purpose of providing safe space for all for encounter, meeting and dialogue is still sorely needed, in Northern Ireland and throughout the world. We all need places on earth where we can feel at home, at peace.

Like Abraham, Sarah, Moses, the people of Israel, and the first disciples of Jesus, we are pilgrims on a journey. As the writer of Hebrews put it, we “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” When we experience “home” here on earth, it whets our appetite for the heavenly home where all are welcome, all are safe, and all are loved. When we receive Christ’s welcome, we are asked to extend it to others. For all around us are people who are lonely, and weary, and carrying heavy burdens.

We have a calling, and a gift, to be Christ’s community of welcome, a place and a people who imitate and foreshadow the home with God which is our eternal destination through Christ. I close with a piece call “The Pilgrim’s Liturgy” by Paul Hutchinson which is used by the Corrymeela Community as a reminder of this journey, and its destination.

We journey together.  
Each person’s stride their own.  
Each person’s load their own.

We journey together.  
We started from different places.  
We share whatever we can.

We journey together.  
Some of us are limping.  
Some of us are leaping.  
We have all stumbled at some point on the road.

We journey together.  
Looking left and right for fellow pilgrims.  
Different, diverse, but not divided.

We journey together.

We affirm this in the name of the God who is at the end of the journey,  
the Christ who has gone before us,  
and the Holy Spirit who accompanies us. Amen.