

Where All Are Welcome  
Eph. 2:11-22  
May 12, 2019  
First Baptist Church, Pottstown  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

What does it mean to be “at home”? To feel like you “belong?” Think of a place where that is true for you: a place where you feel entirely comfortable, relaxed, welcome, a place perhaps where you can be yourself and know that you will be loved, cared for, accepted. Can you name such a place? (Say it out loud!) What are some of these places? Well, some of them are literally our homes or the homes of family members or friends.

The first thing I do when I get home is to take off my shoes. It’s a kind of signal to me that I am “home”, in a safe place, a place where I can be myself. I find that when I am invited to take off my shoes in other spaces, I find myself more “at home” there too, more comfortable in myself and in that space. Feeling comfortable is one way we feel “home.” One of my sons had a friend who would come over and walk right to the refrigerator to see what there was to eat. Occasionally he would bring a brownie or cake mix and ask if he could “borrow” some eggs while he was there! Quite often he would show up just about the time I was putting dinner on the table and after he ate with us, he would express his appreciation and then excuse himself, because after all, his *own* mother was expecting him for dinner! He was one of several of my sons’ friends who would later tell me how meaningful it was for them to know that in our house, everyone gathered for dinner every night, that we prayed before the meal and when they were present, included them and their families in that prayer; that they knew they were welcome at that table, without special invitation but just because they were “home”. I was

always so grateful that they found this welcome in our house, “brothers with other mothers” who felt like they belonged to us.

We are “at home” in many different places. Some places where we feel at home are natural spaces: woods, deserts, oceans, mountains. We experience some internal connection, some sense of groundedness, or perhaps lightness, when we touch, see, feel, breathe in the spirit of the natural world around us. Some of us “belong” in community and some of us “belong” in small groups or mostly alone. Where we find welcome, where we find acceptance, where we find both the internal and external space to be ourselves, to discover our inward most needs and to express our outermost responses is “home”, is the place we “belong.”

The writer of the letter to the church at Ephesus addresses the need to belong, to feel at home by urging the folks to understand themselves in a new relationship with each other and with God. You see, the church at Ephesus was made up of different kinds of folks, folks who had been faithful to their Jewish heritage and tradition as well as folks who were new to faith entirely, having just come to a relationship with God by virtue of their knowledge of Jesus. Some of them thought they were the “in” group and that the others shouldn’t be considered as “righteous”, as “faithful,” as welcome as the rest. Others thought *they* were the ones in the “right” because they didn’t have a history to hold them back or tie them down. So here were two groups of people, with different orientations of faith, trying to live and minister together, representing different priorities, different expressions of faithfulness, different historical contexts, different understandings on how to get to God. “Insiders” and “outsiders” the author calls them; “two groups separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion” trying to find a “home” together. This was, and is, no easy task!

We know something about that. There are some of you who have been in this congregation your entire lives and others who have come only recently in comparison; there are some of us who know other churches and experiences and some who only know this one. There are some of us who have always felt “at home” in the church and others who have never felt like they belonged here or in any church; perhaps that’s why some folks who we’d like to think are connected don’t come. And there are people who have been told by the Christian church as a whole, which historically included this church, they are *not* welcome; those who have been *denied* the opportunity to make their “home” among God’s faithful, because of their race or ethnicity or beliefs, because of their gender or orientation or political perspective. The truth be told, most churches do better at making it *difficult* for people to feel at home than we do at making people feel welcome: we use a strange language, we have funny rituals, we wear weird clothing, we even have our own exclusive collection of art and music! It’s no wonder people don’t feel like they belong; it’s no wonder people don’t call us “home.”

Last week fourteen of us and one guest, met to talk about what it would mean for us to publicly declare our welcome of those who are members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities. Like the folks in the church at Ephesus, these are some folks who many Christians consider to be “outside” the family of God, “outside” the welcome of faith. This church has a long, painful history around this question of inclusion, and it has paid a price in broken relationships and dis-ease. Some of you were here then and some of you were not, and yet that season of our corporate lives remains a part of our communal DNA, our shared history. So, it is with care and intention that Marvin Marsh, your former pastor, moved this conversation along carefully and slowly, even as our culture began to talk more openly about

inclusion. Over the years you have, in practice, extended your welcome and made a home for people of all sexual expressions. When it became an expressed priority of this congregation at our retreat in Feb that we continue to move forward to consider our inclusion of all persons, particularly those of the LGBT communities, a small group drafted and revised a statement that we looked at last Sunday, a statement that essentially echoes the welcome and invitation the church at Ephesus is called to extend to one another. The reason is this: "The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this", the writer says. "...he tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then He started over," according to the text. God started over! Instead of two groups, or more, the writer declares that all are *one* in the Resurrected Christ. "He treated us as equals and so made us equals." Everyone belongs; all are welcome---really!

*Everyone* needs a sense of belonging in order to fulfill their divine purpose. Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes that there are five things every human being requires in order to live into their potential, in order to be motivated to live their best and fullest lives. These needs have been illustrated as a triangle, moving from the broadest, most basic of needs at the bottom, the physiological needs of air, food, water and shelter to the next level where our need for safety is met. Maslow considers "belongingness" as central to our development as humans, the third of five steps on the progressive journey. He says we need to feel accepted, loved, welcomed; we need friendship, trust, and intimacy in relationship before we can feel good about ourselves (esteem, the fourth category), before we can move towards self-actualization,

the fifth and final need. Many scholars understand these not as independent stages but as overlapping and reoccurring realities of our lives.

What happens if we *fail* to have these essential human needs met? Maslow and others believe we fail to fully develop, that we are stunted in our attempts to live into our potential. When we don't have a sense of belonging, at "homeness" in our lives, for example, we have trouble making and maintaining genuine, mature relationships that nurture us and call out the best in us. Our *need* to be in community, to share our lives with one another, to find welcome and acceptance; a place to call "home" is essential to us as human beings. The church at Ephesus learns that inclusion and belonging is essential to be in relationship not only with each other, but with God!

"Christ brought us together through his death on the cross", the writer explains. "The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the [Creator.]" Put another way, thru Christ, whatever has separated us has disappeared. As followers of Jesus, both our gift and our call us to be treated and to treat others as equals, acknowledging that we all share God's Spirit and live as God's likeness. The church then and now, is called to be a place where all are welcome; whatever we thought divided us in the past is no longer relevant in Christ.

And so, we seek to express just that: God's welcome, God's invitation to belong. Does it mean that we limit it to LGBT folks and diversity of other kinds? *Not at all*. We write this statement in order to join the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, a network of

like-minded Baptists across the country who have heard God’s invitation to welcome this particular community. We recognize that just as African Americans have been systemically, intentionally oppressed and marginalized by our society for generations, so has this group. Just as “Black Lives Matter” is an important call to acknowledge that oppression so that we might own, address and transform it, so we call out the systemic oppression of the LGBT community in order to own, address and transform it as well. One is not more important than another; *both* are affirmed and valued here. The writer of Ephesus is clear: “God is building a home. [God’s] using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what [God] is building. [God] used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now [God’s] using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”

“God is building a home”, a place where all are welcome. A place where we can be nurtured and nurture others; a place where we can fail and accept the failure of others. A place where we can love and be loved. And notice this: when we are invited to be at home and to make a home for each other, we are making a home for God!

This is an important consideration for our congregation: how we welcome one another, those that look, talk, act, live like us and *those who don’t*. There isn’t “us” and “them” in the realm of God but rather there is a home for each and every one of us; here is a place we are all meant to belong. Our welcome isn’t limited to one group; we will continue to work intentionally to include all.

This week you will receive a copy of the proposed statement; read it carefully, pray intentionally, then come to discuss it and vote on it at our congregational meeting next week.

We are called to invite each other to the good news of God, who loved us into being just as we are, who molds us in the likeness of Jesus by the Spirit to become who God dreams us to be! We are called to belong to one another and to God and to create a home for all creation.