

May 14, 2017

Year A; Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7: 55-60

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2: 2-10

John 14: 1-14

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Many years ago, when I first moved to Richmond, I rented an apartment over a family’s garage in a suburban neighborhood. I liked the idea of living in a neighborhood versus an apartment complex, as I was looking for a quieter environment. The neighborhood was beautiful with large old trees and wide streets. The place seemed perfect.....until I started living there.

I had just started my ministry at St. Christopher’s School and I moved into this garage apartment in September. The first night I awoke to hear a light, but persistent, tapping sound. I could not identify the source, though it seemed to be coming from the kitchen...I got up, figuring it was an appliance noise I was unfamiliar with....walked in the kitchen, turned on the lights and found the source of the taps. Crickets, humpback camel crickets were everywhere, and yes, as crickets will do, jumping and running into things, thus making surprisingly loud taps at each hit.

I shuddered, grabbed a broom and in a very un-St. Frances-like moment, killed a good number, but as I would learn in subsequent nights, and conversations with my landlord.....they just kept coming up stairs, out of the garage....and that they did this every fall.

My new apartment was not the dwelling place I had hoped for, but the weeks went on. September turned to October, late fall arrived and with it colder weather.....and quickly I realized that this apartment was almost unheatable. The cold air from the unheated garage below made the apartment drafty, and the chill drove even more humpback crickets upstairs looking for warmth....

Finally in November I told my landlords I was moving out, fortunately having a month to month lease. I rented a very small one bedroom apartment in a complex....and moved in.

For several months after I moved in, every time I heard the heat switch on, day or night, I had to stop and say a prayer of thanksgiving.....As the cold winds and snows of winter came on, I was unable to take heat for granted.....And I was so grateful to be able to get up in the night and not find humpback crickets on my kitchen counter. That tiny apartment was a refuge of warmth and safety and rest, and I treasured it.

Our Gospel reading today from John is so familiar to us.....As we hear Jesus say: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places".....many of us may remember funerals at which we have heard this reading.....A reading like this brings those loved ones, now on a distant shore, this reading brings them closer as we hear of Jesus's assurance that we will never be lost to our God.....

Jesus' assurance that a dwelling place is prepared for us...a place that, like my tiny apartment provided a foretaste of..... a place that is warm and safe and we are at home.....

I love how The Message translation offers this reading.....with echoes of a parent saving a place for us:

"There is plenty of room for you in my Father's home. If that weren't so, would I have told you that I'm on my way to get a room ready for you? And if I'm on my way to get your room ready, I'll come back and get you so you can live where I live."

Jesus spoke these words to his followers at the Last Supper, they are part of what is called The Farewell Discourses, Jesus' final time to speak alone with his followers, and to tell them of the future, that he would be arrested and killed.

AND to tell them that he would rise again, AND that he would ascend, go back to the Father in heaven.....Jesus offered comfort and hope to his followers at that Last Supper, though they continued to be confused and oh so like us, self-centered and only half listening.

Jesus tells his followers, and onward to us today, that death is not ever the final word in our lives....That we all have a place, a room in our father's house, a dwelling place that is ours.....that we will never be separated from our God, and through God, never separated from those we love.

Now this word of comfort from Jesus is deep and profound, and has brought so many of us a peace beyond all we thought possible.....during seasons of sorrow and grief.

But the Farewell Discourses also hold a challenge to us in our earthly life, God's challenge and invitation NOW to do God's work on this earth, to care for God's world and God's broken and tired people...And specifically here to do that work, by creating and offering dwelling places here and now...places of welcome and safety and hope.

And where can we create dwelling places? We can begin here at church....renewing our commitment to create dwelling places in the pew and at coffee hour, welcoming, inviting, speaking....noticing, and re-noticing who is here, and who might need a listening ear....making our church, in all ways, a place of hospitality, a shelter from the storms of this earthly life.

In addition we are called, as the closing words of our service say..."to go forth in the name of Christ"....not to figure church is done by Sunday afternoon, but that church begins when we leave here and go forth....out there.....where are called to create dwelling places?

My experience with the humpback crickets is so minor, and I had the resources to move quickly, but so many live in our community in substandard housing, housing that cannot keep families warm in the winter or cool in the summer...or keep the bugs and rodents away. What groups are we perhaps called to partner with in the work of creating more decent housing, safe and warm dwelling places, in our county?

Of course, a dwelling place can be many things, not just a house. Years ago I attended a church in Richmond, St. Andrew's that also housed a free Episcopal school for children in grades K-5 from low income families. The secretary at the school was an amazing woman, known by all as Miss Judy.

Miss Judy saw her work at the school's front desk as far more than a job...it was her mission site and all she did was in service to others, especially the children. St. Christopher's did projects to help at St. Andrew's but Miss Judy also knew she could call me at anytime to rally up a collection among my kids, if a need arose...We collected toothbrushes and snacks, pencils and erasers....all such small things but all crucial if you did not have them, and you knew Miss Judy had a place for you at her desk, and would quietly help you.

Miss Judy had been at the school for many years, long enough that students would come back as teenagers and even adults to see her and the school.

One day Miss Judy told me of a visitor she had seen that week. A young man had come in, now in his 20s, a young man she knew had had a very difficult situation at home, little care and safety there. And Miss Judy told me the young man had come by to tell her that the only place he felt safe as a child was at his desk at St. Andrew's School.....a place he was known and understood and supported...a dwelling place, a mansion, prepared for him each day.....

So we are invited and challenged by our God to create dwelling places here on earth.... places of welcome and safety and hope.

It is not always easy work but our strength is not our own but comes from our Lord....And so we must conclude today with one more dwelling place, the one where we are renewed for the hard work of ministry....the dwelling place that Jesus offered that night in the Upper Room, and that is here for us each week, Jesus invited us to dwell at this table, together.

But for some even coming to the table can feel difficult and they might have turned away from other tables, other dwelling places might not have been welcoming...And so I invite you to listen with new ears in a few minutes, new ears to hear the invitation to the table just before we come forward for communion....an invitation that tells us all, friends and strangers, of our dwelling place, our safe home here.

Amen.

The Rev. Megan Limburg