

“Longing to Go Home”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Exodus 16: 1-8 and Matthew 2: 19-23

It took 30 years. Finally, I am home: back in Michigan. Good for me, and hopefully soon, for Cindy. It’s been a lifelong dream ever since the day after our wedding we left for Kansas City. And yet, it would be a lie to say that I had no home for the past 30 years. Home is more than where you live. It’s where you are known, loved, cared for, challenged, held, and allowed to grow. Throughout the last 30 years, we have had all those things. In Missouri, Wisconsin, and now here.

Brian McLaren, in his latest challenging book, *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*, shares the following story:

There once was a bird who lived in a tree. The bird was named Faithful. From the time she was a tiny hatchling, her parents used to sing a song every morning. The song was called “Home,” but Faithful thought Home was the name of her tree.

Even after her siblings fledged and flew away, Faithful never ventured far from the next. It was all she had ever known through the spring and summer of her life. To her, it was Home.

Fall came. The leaves changed from green to amber, rust, pumpkin, and scarlet. “Home has never been more beautiful!” Faithful thought. “I’m so glad I stayed.”

One day, gusty winds blew and a hard, cold rain fell. One by one, the leaves flew off the tree. After the storm, Faithful became worried. "Home has never been so ugly," she said.

She looked up and saw other birds flying. She wondered if she should join them. Would it be safe? Would her tree survive without her? Would she survive without the tree? What would her parents think, after providing such a beautiful nest in this tree called Home?

To stay or leave...it felt like the biggest choice she would ever make.

One morning, one of her brothers, Adventure, flew in and perched on a branch beside her. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he said. "It's time to migrate."

"I don't know what to do," Faithful said. "I don't know if I should stay Home or leave."

Adventure cocked his head. "Faithful, I think you're confused," he tweeted. "Home isn't the name of your tree. Home is the name of your song. Wherever you sing your song, that is your home."

Today, we begin a new sermon series called *Belonging*. And the first installment is today's message: We are All Longing to go Home. But maybe you never left Gaylord, or this church, or even the pew in which you sit. Maybe your family has been loving and supportive, and you have felt as though you belong here.

Literally in this place. If so, that is wonderful news! I'm so glad for you!

While many people may feel at home in the town in which they grew up, fewer people believe that they belong in the church. They're different from whatever the norm is. They may be gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual, queer... Maybe they haven't "succeeded" in the way people thought they "should". Maybe they

have intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, or both. It could be true that they have made some bad choices along the way. Worse than that, any of these people, and many others I haven't named, feel judged by the church and feel that there is no home for them here, or in any church.

McLaren names many reasons in his book, but I'll save that for another day, hopefully after the first of the year when we may delve more deeply into his challenging expose' on the church. But for now, our task is to concentrate on what it takes make people feel as though they belong in this place...this church...this faith community.

An author I only know as *Starhawk* says it this way:

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place half remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community... a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power...A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

Wouldn't it be sensational if everyone could find such a place. Even more so, if they could find it here, in this community and in this church. As I thought about what home means to me this week, it is Michigan, but more than that, it's what I've experienced elsewhere and will soon here as well. I live in my dream home in a dream location. And yet, I don't know many people yet. It can get lonely from time to time. This is not said so that you worry for or pity me. No, it's that home

is more than a place, it is a people, a place where there is community...where eyes light up as we enter, voices celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. I haven't been here long enough yet to have this experience outside this congregation, but I feel it's coming. It's hard to form a community in a pandemic.

Here's the point. I'm sure that there are many, even those who grew up here, who still feel little or no sense of community. Suicide rates across the country and northern Michigan bear witness to the fact that even though we may be surrounded by people – beautiful people – we may feel lost and alone and longing for community. I won't have that problem – I believe – because I in every way constitute what is “normal” or what “belongs”. The call for the church is to be the place where those who don't belong in the rest of the community belong here. It's the Jesus model. We have enough judgment. We have enough ostracization. We have enough finger pointing to last many lifetimes. And yet, much of the church would rather circle the wagons and point their fingers out at “those people”, instead of being the community Christ called us to be.

Rev. Karen LeBlanc says it this way:

This isn't just a place of worship.

This isn't just a fellowship of like minds.

*This isn't just a Sunday morning filled with
Spirit and topped off with coffee and cookies.
This is our church, our congregation,
Where we are building Beloved Community,
Where we are opening ourselves to each other,
Where we trust and love,
Rise and fall,
Together.
This is where we feel safe,
This is where we are welcomed,
This is where we belong.
For this Gift and so many others, we light our chalice.*

Belonging is more than just being nice to other people – although it helps. It's demonstrated acts in solidarity with those who don't feel as though they belong. It's tangible, like a bathroom remodel. It's Spiritual, like open-minded faithfulness. It's familial, like words of challenge said with care. It's peaceful, knowing we are safer here than perhaps anywhere else in our world. My friends, belonging isn't just a nice theme for worship, it's a task to which we are called that is far more difficult than we think it is. Because it's not about words, but words with action.

Yes, I'm issuing a challenge. But you have far more ability to meet that challenge than some of you – maybe most of you – imagine. Our words have been good. Our thoughts and prayers have been offered. We've taken many steps, but I ask you, what more can we do to make people feel as though they belong here. Not just tolerated. But belong here. Not just prayed for, but belong here. Not just thought about, or just spoken about, but truly belonging.

What would it take? What might our next step be? What risk would we have to take? What discomfort might we endure? What Christ do we follow?

Amen.