

“Home”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself.”

- Maya Angelou

Reading “Touched by an Angel” – Maya Angelou

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

Sermon: “Home”

It’s sweet.

It’s one’s castle.

It’s where the heart is.

It’s where you hang your hat.

It’s where you bring the bacon—and “fry it up in a pan.”¹

There’s no other place like it.

And to get back there, Glinda, the Good Witch,
informs us: we only need to close our eyes,
tap our heels together three times,
and think to ourselves: “There’s no place like home.”

It’s such a well-worn word, so prone to cliché,
that any serious talk of home can easily be dismissed as drivel.

And yet it is one of the most evocative words in the English language.

In an instant, a passing mention of home
conjures countless smells and sounds, tastes and textures.

It swiftly brings to mind images that speak
of comfort and joy, of safety and security,
of familiarity and all its consequences.

The word “home” is evocative, too, of a complex of emotions,
not unlike what Maya Angelou referred to
as “ecstasies/old memories of pleasure/ancient histories of pain.”

Our understanding of home can be bittersweet.

The poet Robert Frost said of home that it
“is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

Some of us, myself included,
painfully learned at some point in life that this isn’t necessarily true.

¹ Anyone remember the perfume ad from the late 1970’s?
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA4DR4vEgrs>)

Others of us have never known, or, maybe, didn't for a long time,
the safety and security of home,
because the place where we lived (or maybe live, even still)
was touched by emotional abuse or physical violence, or both.

All of this speaks to the most basic fact
that our understanding of home
is so much more than the residence where we dwell.

Home, at its best, is a sanctuary, a place of peace.
A place that is inviolable—or, at least, should be.

That's why the question, "Where's home for you?"
is very different from the question, "Where you are from?"
or "What part of the city do you live in?"

"Where's home for you?" is a qualitative question
that asks us to speak to that sacred place
where the heart of who we are dwells.

That's not to say the question, "Where are you from?"
doesn't factor into whatever answer we might give.

Geography is, after all, highly important when speaking of home.

I'm most mindful of this whenever I travel.
As the answer depends, to some degree, on where I'm at when being asked.

If I'm asked in Toronto where I'm from,
I have to explain that I'm American.

If I'm asked the question elsewhere within Canada,
I tend to say I'm American, but live in Toronto.
I then duck and await the snide comment that often comes.
(I simply chalk up such hostility as one of the costs of living in Toronto
when travelling to the Rest of Canada. A price I'm glad to pay!)

When I'm outside North America, though, and asked where I'm from,
I'm growing more and more comfortable with simply saying, "Toronto,"
and leaving it at that.

Increasingly, Toronto feels like where I'm from.
It's where my life is.

And after seven years here, it just doesn't feel quite right or truthful
to not at least include Toronto as a significant part of the answer.

This summer, I spent several weeks in Europe and I discovered something
that most if not all of you have probably known for some time.

I found that when I told people I was from Toronto and left it at that,
they very often felt empowered, without skipping a beat,
to tell me how very irritating they find Americans.

I would usually just smile and nod and say, "I know. I know."

But truth be told, and told in full, the answer to where I'm from
or the place I call home includes a very long list of marks on the map.

Home is a place, but, at the same time, it isn't.

It's actually multiple places. Slices of the landscape as varied as the cities where
I've lived: Dallas, Boston, and Toronto. Oberlin and Cambridge.

Though I very happily live in Toronto,
there is a piece of home for me still in all of those places.
One's heart can be scattered.

And, yet, of course, explaining where home is
involves so much more than geography.

I know something of home in my marriage with Bob,
in my covenant with this congregation, and in my ties to family and friends.

It's also in the books that have formed me,
and in the music that has moved me.

Parts of home, for me, are found in objects:
in the ancient ornaments that once hung from my family's Christmas tree
and in the Greek New Testament, with its fading pages,
that once belonged to my grandfather and now belongs to me.

I also know something of home in food:
in my Nana's crumbling cornbread
and my grandmother's gooey coconut cake.

Lasting gifts from women who crafted some of my earliest
and most enduring memories of home.

Women who help me to know the meaning of home, to this day,
though they have both now been dead for years
and it's been almost two decades since I have tasted their cooking.

While home is a place usually found on a map,
it is also a mix of beloved people and cherished objects,
thread-bare memories and sometimes unspoken dreams.

Home holds both, at once, a sense of contentment and a sense of longing,
side by side in a seemingly eternal tension.

I think at its simplest and most profound,
home is where we know we belong.

Where we are fully able to be who we are—or at least take the risk to try.

The place where we feel connected to what is around us,
and, maybe even life's gentle embrace that reminds us, again and again,
that we are a child of the universe.

It is possible, then, to have many, many homes.

My hope is that this place is at least one of the homes for your heart,
for your inmost self.

A place that welcomes you in,
and holds you in love when need be.

A place that allows you to be fully who you are,
while inviting you to become more of the person you aspire to be.

A place that keeps you connected to the web of life
and tethered to the values that you most want
to guide your days on this good green earth.

It's no coincidence that so many people arrive in this place and say that they feel they have "come home."

There is much in what we have and do here that fits the bill.

And, even still, even for those of us happily ensconced here—even for those with wonderful homes scattered around town, and across the country, or all over the globe, it's all-too-possible to feel, from time to time, dangerously disconnected, and a very long way from what we call home.

This spring I heard a story at our Annual Conference in Montreal that has stayed with me—and likely with those of you who were also there.

It is a story, on its surface, about, of all things, toast.²
But it's a story about so much more.
At its deepest level, it is a story, I believe, about home.

The story is told by John Garvois, writing for *Pacific Standard Magazine*.

Noticing an odd culinary trend in San Francisco, he had decided to find its source.

That trend was toast.
Gourmet toast sold to hipsters.
Selling at \$4 a slice.

The city was in an uproar over it for a time.
It was a symbol of the very high cost of living in San Francisco.

And caused people to ask just how privileged and out of touch one had to be to spend \$4 on a slice of toast that could be cooked, with relative ease, for pennies at home.

It seemed conspicuous consumption had reached a new and obnoxious level.

² John Gravois, "A Toast Story" *Pacific Standard Magazine* (psmag.com), 13 January 2014.

With some effort, the writer traced the origins of the trend to the Outer Sunset neighbourhood.

To a spot called Trouble.

Or, more specifically, The Trouble Coffee & Coconut Club.

It is “a tiny storefront next door to a Spanish-immersion preschool, about three blocks from the Pacific Ocean in one of the city’s windiest, foggiest, farthest-flung areas. As places of business go, . . . Trouble [is] impressively odd.”

The little café’s patio is dominated by a tree trunk turned on its side. There are benches made of salvaged wood, but no tables or chairs. People lounge around on the tree trunk, drinking their coffee and eating their toast like “lions draped over tree limbs in the Serengeti.”

The small shop, about the size of a single-car garage, is known for serving up cinnamon toast—a simple slice of white bread slathered with butter and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar.

It is a tasty treat that stirs nostalgia in anyone who ate it as a kid.

While that explains, in part, the shop’s popularity, it doesn’t explain it all.

The centre of the story is Giulietta Carrelli, the owner of Trouble.

She “is a slight, blue-eyed, 34-year-old woman with freckles tattooed on her cheeks. . .

She has a good toast story:

She grew up in a rough neighbourhood of Cleveland in the ’80s and ’90s in a big immigrant family, her father a tailor from Italy, her mother an ex-nun.”

“The family didn’t eat much standard American food. But cinnamon toast, made in a pinch, was the exception. ‘We never had pie,’ she says. ‘Our . . . comfort food was cinnamon toast.’”

“In public, [she] wears a remarkably consistent uniform: a crop top with ripped black jeans and brown leather lace-up boots,

with her blond hair wrapped in... scarves and headbands. At her waist is a huge silver screaming-eagle belt buckle, and her torso is covered with tattoos of hand tools and designs taken from 18th-century wallpaper patterns. Animated and lucid—her blue eyes bright above a pair of strikingly ruddy cheeks—[Giulietta]...banter[s] with pretty much every person who visit[s the] shop.”

She is a character, and she is memorable.

Over the last few years, Giulietta has built a quirky little coffee shop with a rather bizarre menu.

In addition to cinammon toast, her café sells coffee, grapefruit juice, and coconuts. That’s it.

The coconuts come from a bit of an experiment she once conducted on a street corner.

She found, if she stood with a sandwich in her hand saying hello to people, no one would talk to her.

But holding a coconut was a different story. People couldn’t resist engaging with her.

That engagement with other people is critical to the success of Trouble.

As it turns out, the Trouble Coffee & Coconut Club is more than a café. It “is a carpentered-together, ingenious mechanism—a specialized tool—designed to keep [Giulietta] tethered to herself.”

From the time she was in high school, Giulietta has lived with a mental health disorder that is a combination of schizophrenia and bipolarity.

She is prone to manic moods and regular psychotic episodes that “can shut her down with little warning for hours, days, or, in the worst instances, months....

When an episode comes on, she describes the experience as a kind of death: Sometimes she gets stuck hallucinating,

hearing voices, unable to move or see clearly;
other times she has wandered the city aimlessly,” lost for hours.

Her illness wasn't diagnosed for years.
As a young adult, she bounced around
between homes, and schools, and jobs.

“But her episodes were a kind of time bomb
that occasionally leveled any structure in her life.
Roommates always ended up kicking her out.
Landlords evicted her. Relationships fell apart.
Employers either fired her or quietly stopped scheduling her for shifts.
.... By the time she hit 30, she had lived in nine different cities.”

She self-medicated with drugs and alcohol,
and was in and out of hospital and periods of homelessness.

But, oddly enough, her saving grace and sense of safety
was found “in simply being well-known—
in attracting as many acquaintances as possible.”

That's why she had always worked in coffee shops.

Her gregarious presence and charisma allowed her to make friends
with almost anyone, even when they were taken aback by her appearance.

Her way of being “was in part a survival mechanism, as were her tattoos
and her daily uniform of headscarves, torn jeans, and crop tops.
The trick was to be identifiable: The more people who recognized her,
the more she stood a chance of being able to recognize herself.”

A few years ago, one of her bosses suggested it was time
for her to think about working for herself,
since she wasn't able to hold down a job working for others.

He asked her a life-altering question:
“What is your useful skill in a tangible situation?”

“[Her] answer was easy:
she was good at making coffee and good with people.”

She borrowed \$1000 from friends and opened up Trouble
“in a smelly, cramped, former dog grooming business,
on a bleak commercial stretch. . . .
She called the shop Trouble. . .
in honour of all the people who helped her when she was in trouble” herself.

She put coconuts on the menu because of the years
she had spent relying on them for easy sustenance,
and because they truly did help her strike up conversations with strangers.

The grapefruit juice was to supplement the coconuts,
which you can survive on if you have a source of Vitamin C.

And she put toast on the menu because it reminded her of home.

While she pulled her life together, became a mother to two kids,
and successfully guided her business,
she continued to have psychotic episodes.

She would often just barrel through them somehow and keep working.

Eventually, though, she ended up in hospital for five months and was, finally,
given a diagnosis—and with it, the treatment that she needs.

She continues to struggle, but Trouble “is a tool for keeping her alive.”

It has given her a routine and a vast network of friends and acquaintances.

When an episode comes on, she knows that “a hello from a casual
acquaintance in some unfamiliar part of the city might make the difference
between whether she makes it home that night or not.”

And so she wears the same outfit every day
and takes the same routes through the city.
She does this, knowing that if people recognize her, they can help her.

The beautiful thing is that her business is doing well.
She’s opened a second shop and now employs fourteen people
and provides them with profit-sharing and dental coverage.

Her goal is to open more shops, and with the proceeds,
“open a halfway house for people who have psychotic episodes—
a safe place where they can go when they are in trouble.”

Home, the poet wrote, “is the place where,
when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

In knitting herself into the fabric of her city—into the web of life itself—
Giulietta has made not only a home for herself,
but discovered her desire to make a home for others.

Such is the real work of this life.

The journey toward home for any of us
is as much an inner path we follow as it is some physical place we inhabit.

So, I must ask: “where is home for you?”

May you see it all around you:
in the people and places that you love,
in the memories and moments that fill your days with meaning,
in the ties that uphold you in the great web of life,
and remind you that you, a child of the universe,
are, already and always, home.

Amen.