

June 26, 2016
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 9:51-62

“But the Church Has Nowhere to Lay Its Head”

One of the perks of being an English teacher in China was that my students who were from all over the Guangdong province would invite me to their homes. At least I thought it was a perk, until I actually took one of them up on it. Pauline (not her real name), I never bothered to invest time in learning her real name. Pauline, invited me to her house in the very south of Guangdong for the weekend one summer. Her family had a lychee farm and it was the lychee season. I, like most sentient human beings, love lychees and thought it'd be a real treat to spend a few days picking lychees off the trees.

But after an all-night train ride and then an early morning motorcycle ride followed by a breakfast of salty beef broth in the market, when I arrived with Pauline at her home, I did not feel as if I had arrived at any kind of home. I was tired and hot and so very very thirsty. When I gulped down the tea in my little cup, Pauline and her family laughed. Her grandmother said something in her Chinese dialect. Pauline told me that her grandmother thought I was like a Chinese girl because I was quiet and like an American girl because I was greedy. Apparently that's the opposite of what I should have been – lively like an American girl while sipping tea like a Chinese girl. That night I slept on a wooden bed with no mattress or pillow; I awoke to small children staring at me through the window. This seemed like a high price to pay for lychees. I had never felt so far away from home.

I had left home because I wanted to see a wider world, which is just another way of saying that truthfully I was a greedy American girl. Greedy for exotic experience, greedy for stamps in my passport, greedy for what would make me seem worldly. A greedy girl who

thought that the world was a toy box made just for me. It just goes to show you how privileged I was and am, that I had to go halfway around the world to a remote village in order to experience feeling out of place, awkward, and unwelcome. It was a long way to go for lychees and a lesson and while the lychees are long gone, the lesson is something I hold onto. I want to remember what it feels like to be without a home.

Christians have a complicated relationship with home. From our Jewish forbears we know that we are not supposed to be at home. We are strangers in a strange land who were once slaves in Egypt. We are told to welcome the stranger because that's who we were. There's a lot of confusion and back and forth about whether God wants or needs a home. And so began the complicated relationship of the Jews to God's home in the temple in Jerusalem that continues to this day.

Christians are taught that the new home of God would be in a person, Mary, the *theotokos* or God bearer. And that in some mysterious way, because of the Incarnation, we are also God bearers and each of us is God's home. Though Jesus may have a father who has many dwelling places, we hear today that while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

We try to keep this tension alive in our churches. This is God's house, but we take God out with us when we receive Eucharist and go into the world. In one case God's home is located and plottable on a map, in the other case it is scattered and kinetic.

To me, being at home means that I can be fully myself and that I am comfortable. Home is safe. Recently we have had cause to think about the ways in which certain groups in our society have found homes – places of comfort and safety – and how those homes have been threatened. It has been noted that the black church has been a home for African Americans to be

themselves, to lift each other up, to gather hope and resources in order to live in a hostile environment. The LGBTQ community found homes in gay clubs – safe spaces where they could joyfully show affection. Both of these homes came under threat in the last year. In June of 2015, nine members of Mother Emanuel Church were gunned down by a young man obsessed with racial hatred. A couple of weeks ago 49 were shot and killed by a possible Islamic terrorist slash self-hating homophobe.

The men who did these killings were themselves feeling a loss of home. We see some of their fear and hatred in current political activity around the globe. There is apprehension and longing: we want our country back! They say, though the country they want has only existed in their imagination or at least it will only exist in the imagination in any kind of future. But they are incapable of tolerating this new homelessness and so they look to deny others' homes: migrants who are drowning by the boatload in the sea; lovers who fear holding hands; brown and black people who must give their children “the talk” to try to keep them safe from strangers who fail to see them as human beings. Their homes are at risk.

I don't share the story of my visit with Pauline's family because it's anything like the daily sense of dislocation that persecuted groups face in this country and abroad. I share it to remind myself how awful dislocation feels to me and how easy it is to jump from discomfort to mockery and from mockery to rage. “Lord, do you want us to command fire down from heaven to consume them?” the disciples James and John ask, trying to be helpful I suppose when Jesus is faced with rejection from a Samaritan village. Hyperbolic, perhaps, but I can relate; I've had days like that. And I've found all kinds of ways to protect myself from feeling rejected or to keep from feeling like I don't belong. If we cannot tolerate feeling unrooted and uncomfortable, we will lash out – we will find others and enemies as targets to distract from our own sense of

insecurity. If we don't see this tendency to other, to deflect from our own sense of dislocation, how will we stop its toxic spread in the world?

St. Mark's is actively seeking to grow its membership, which is good. We're experiencing the same trend lines all mainline churches are experiencing, and most non-mainline churches for that matter. There are fewer new, younger people coming in and those that are here are aging. It is not a sustainable trend. But our language of growth can easily drift into a narrative of seeking young people of means who exist to sustain our home. They go with the furniture that is already here. We wouldn't want them to clash with the décor.

I think younger folks with disposable income need the gospel as much as anyone else. I'm not sure they exist in great enough numbers to sustain our church in the way we in which we are accustomed. But regardless of all that, it is not an inspiring message for those already here or for those who are coming. Jesus urgently calls us to leave behind our old customs and ties, leave them behind without saying goodbye. And he allies himself with those who are dislocated, homeless, and othered. This is compassionate, but also life-saving for us – saving us from toxic narcissism and insecurity.

This might mean opening ourselves to different and unfamiliar music or prayers or ways of gathering together; it might mean exploring outside the boundaries of these walls; it might mean a whole host of things on a spectrum of exciting to terrifying.

Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. We might choose this path because we wouldn't want to be home in a world that makes so many people homeless – literally and figuratively. Or we might choose this path because our true home might be wilder and more dangerous than any fortress or fantasy we could build for ourselves.