“IT TAKES A HEAP O’ LIVIN’”

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First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Ezra 6:1-20

Time was when any Michigander worth his mitten could have told you who Edgar Guest was. His folksy poetry was a mainstay of Michigan traditions, none more famous than his poem simply entitled “Home”:

It takes a heap o’ livin’ in a house t’ make it home,
A heap o’ sun and shadder, an’ ye sometimes have t’ roam
Afore ye really ‘preciate the things ye lef’ behind,
And hunger fer ‘em somehow, with ‘em allus on yer mind.

Within the walls there’s got t’ be some babies born, and then
Right there ye’ve got t’ bring ‘em up t’ women good, an’ men.

Ye’ve got t’ weep t’ make home, ye’ve got t’ sit and sigh
An’ watch beside a loved one’s bed, an’ know that Death is nigh.
Ye’ve got t’ sing an’ dance fer years, ye’ve got t’ romp an’ play,
An learn t’ love the things ye have by usin’ ‘em each day.

Ye’ve got t’ love each brick an’ stone from cellar up t’ dome:
It takes a heap o’ livin’ in a house t’ make it home.

Birth and death, weeping and dancing, falling in love with every brick and stone…it’s the living, of course, which turns a house into a home.

Today I want to think about images of home…

Any time I preach on the image of “home,” I always have to acknowledge the fact that, since my birth, I’ve lived in eleven houses, two college dorms and three cottages in nine different towns in four different states. For many of those years we used Judy’s dad’s 1920s wooden Chief Scout wagon as our coffee table, so I often said, “Home is wherever the wagon is.” I can tell you, in each of those places, it was the living, the loving, the laughing, the longing, the dancing and the tears that made it truly home.

Home… This year we will build our thirteenth house with Habitat for Humanity. Hopefully, we are building not just a house, but a home for a family—built with the toil and sweat of members
of this church and other churches, built with the financial gifts of our congregations and the help of dedicated businesses, skilled tradesmen and clumsy volunteers who will be fed by sandwich makers and transported by bus drivers, all giving their time and effort to build a house which can become a home.

Of course, we are not giving these houses away. The Habitat family will put their own sweat equity into it, and then they will pay off a mortgage over the years just like the rest of us. But I dare say there is something special about a house that will carry within its walls the love and prayers, the sweat and perhaps a little blood from dozens of folks who invest their time and scrape their knees, and maybe even hit a thumb in bringing it about. When we build a Habitat house, we are not just building a house. We are preparing a home with the living that gets worked into the woodwork and wiring, the beams and bricks, the mortar and mud of the house. I can promise you this: it will take a heap o’ livin’ by a heap o’ folks to build that house, and the day we gather to bless and consecrate it, it will be ready to become home.

Home… This weekend I was at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of Adrian College. On Friday night we had dinner with some of the scholarship recipients. Sitting next to me was a beautiful young woman….majoring in interior design, winsome smile, delightful conversation. Then she told her story. Her mother and stepfather together had eleven children. She is one of the oldest. They moved from house to house, often because they had been evicted, and in high school she and her sister cleaned motel rooms so their family could stay there. No one in her family had ever gone to college. But through a scholarship at Adrian, she was able to come. She said, “After all I have been through, this place finally feels like home.”

Ezra would have understood… The people of Israel had been homeless, in exile during the years of the Babylonian captivity. The city of Jerusalem and the Temple had been completely destroyed and the people carried off into bondage. They were a people longing for home. Now, under King Darius, the people returned and permission was given to rebuild the temple. The King even agreed to pay for it! And Ezra says the people labored and built, “…and the house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.” Finally, after their long and painful exile, after a heap o’ livin’ and a heap o’ work, they were home. And Ezra says the people celebrated the dedication of the House of the Lord, with joy!

You see where I am going with this…

This is our home, our spiritual home,
and it takes a heap o’ livin’ to make a house a home.

We’re getting ready to break ground on the renovation of the South Wing. Bids are coming in and your building committee will be making decisions this week. Hopefully by mid-April (immediately after the rummage sale), we will be ready to break ground.

My friend, Tom Frank, is a professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He puts it all in its proper perspective in his book, The Soul of the Congregation. He writes:
Our places are a gift from God, so that we will have a means for seeking God among us. God’s presence comes at the places in which our lives meet in community with others and with God.

God doesn’t need our sanctuaries. God scallops the arches of the universe for God’s space; God has the stars for a chandelier, the spinning planes for music, the clouds for windows of image and light. We are the ones who need sanctuaries and build them in hope that by gathering week after week in this one place, the God of all creation will grant us a glimpse of grace.

(Thomas Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation*, page 42)

I think he is right. These sacred spaces—this sanctuary, the parlors and classrooms, Fellowship Hall and kitchen, the CLC and Choir Room, nurseries and Children’s Center—are all a gift from God so that we have a place to seek him. Here, in this place and in the community of God’s people, we come one step closer to discovering the presence of the Christ who promised that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be present in the midst.

As important as this renovation is, it is given meaning by the heap o’ livin’ that goes on here. All these spaces take on meaning as they become a space for God’s people to gather and to discover Christ’s presence here. It’s not just about what we build here, but what we do here. I think Edgar Guest was right. With babies being born and raised here, tears being shed when death comes near here, dancing and laughter being heard here, and bread being broken and food being shared here, we make these spaces sacred, and we pray that in the midst of it all, Christ will be made known to us in the breaking of the bread and our sharing as the Body of Christ. As Tom Frank says, “We need these spaces and we build them in hope that by gathering week after week in this one place, the God of all creation will grant us a glimpse of grace.”

*It takes a heap o’ livin’ to make this our spiritual home.*

The Tuesday Women’s Book Group has been reading Barbara Brown Taylor’s *An Altar In the World*. At one point she talks about the churches she was involved in and describes what they meant to her:

Turning aside from everything else we could have been doing, we did things together in those sacred spaces that we did nowhere else in our lives; we named our babies, we buried our dead, we sang psalms, we praised God. When we did, it was as if we were building a fire together, each of us adding something to the blaze so that the light and heat in our midst grew. Yet the light exceeded our fire, just as the warmth did. We did our parts, and then there was more. There was more.

(Taylor, *Altar in the World*, page 5)

The “more,” of course, is the presence of God’s spirit, the assurance of God’s grace, the mercy and love of God made known in God’s people.
Images of home…

- Habitat houses
- our homes
- our sacred spaces which become our spiritual home

One more image…the promise of our final home.

My generation will always remember Billy Graham as the evangelist who preached to 215 million people in 185 countries. Now 94 years old, he has written what is probably his last book, entitled simply Nearing Home. He writes, “Some day our life’s journey will be over. In a sense, we all are nearing home.” Graham says his prayer is to grow old with grace, and to finish well. He compares his life to a baseball game, picturing himself hitting a big-league grand slam into the stadium seats and hearing the crowd roar with thunder as he runs the bases, nearing home. (Graham, Nearing Home, page ix and 2)

And as I read his book, I thought, “If I make it to 94, and even if I don’t, whenever I find myself nearing death, I hope I will be able to approach it with the confidence that I am nearing home. Jesus said, “In my father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again to take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.” –At home with Jesus.

The Psalmist says, “How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts.” –At home with God.

St. Paul says we have an inheritance, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. I can’t give the dimensions, the number of bathrooms, or whether it has brick or aluminum siding, but there’s the promise. –At home, eternal in the heavens.

John the Revelator envisions a time and a place where there will be no more crying, no more pain, for the former things have passed away and all God’s people will be gathered in the presence of Christ. –Home with each other.

And the more friends I have on the other side, the more it feels like home might just be waiting for me there on the other side.

My first appointment was in a small town in western Pennsylvania, Hawthorn by name. It only had one little grocery store, a post office and three little churches. It also had a funeral home—Dale Alcorn’s funeral home. It was one of those small town funeral homes where the first floor of a house had been enlarged to accommodate a viewing parlor, complete with a plastic runner which ran all the way up to the casket, to keep the carpet clean. Since I was the only full-time pastor in town, I got all the calls for funerals for folks who didn’t have a church as well as my own. In my first year in ministry, I had nineteen funerals.

Dale Alcorn didn’t have an organist, but he did have a tape player, and he would convince his families that they needed some music, played from a cassette tape (for those of you who are old
enough to remember cassette tapes) through an antiquated sound system. I can’t tell you how many times I heard a wobbly arrangement of “The Lord’s Prayer” or “Amazing Grace.” Another favorite was “Going Home.” It’s the tune Antonin Dvorak would pick up from the old spiritual and include in his “New World Symphony”:

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Going home, going home, I’m a going home.
Going home, going home, I’m just going home.
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Maybe Edgar Guest was right…it takes a heap o’ livin’

- to make a Habitat house a home
- to make this house our spiritual home
- to make our way to our final home

Going home, going home, I’m just going home.