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God's Household
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Jesus told his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." John 14:1-2

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

I am extremely fortunate to have grown up in a family that believes those words and showed me what they mean by living by the credo there is always room for one more.

One way my parents manifested this belief was every time I got a new baby sister or brother. I am the eldest of four children, and from the moment my parents shared the news with me that our family was growing, to the welcoming of the new family member, to making adjustments to having a new person in the household, my parents treated the growth as something that is part of being a family. We celebrated each new family member by making room for them, and sometimes that meant we had to give up certain things. I remember it was particularly painful for me when my first sister was born; I was no longer the only child and my parents didn't have as much time to play with me. While it was painful, I was shown that making space for my sister was better for her, for the family, and even for me sharing attention and helping to care for my sister. When my brother entered our family, I could help my sister through her discomfort when we made room for him. By the time my youngest sister surprised us all by coming along unplanned, we were well practiced at making room.

My family didn't just make room for children. We had to make room for my dad's business when he decided to start his own plumbing business instead of working for someone else. That meant years of financial struggle, my dad having to leave for emergency calls sometimes during family time, and we spent some Saturdays, and times when other families were playing helping my dad with minor tasks for his business.

When my siblings got married, we again had to step back and make room for their spouses. Each one brought changes to the family and how we gathered together. When I was ordained a priest, my family had to make room for my new responsibilities and role, which affected our family gatherings for holidays like Christmas and Easter.

It isn't just people my family made room for. Throughout my life we made room for stray cats, kittens and dogs who came our way and became part of the family.

We also learned to make room for painful changes. When a grandparent or other family member died, we learned to make room for the absence their death brought to our family. It was an emptiness we couldn't fill and learned that loss is part

of love. We learned to accept the pain of loss and make that loss part of our family, because our family could not be whole without it.

Some changes challenged our core belief. When my brother got divorced, it threw my family for a loop. They struggled with how to deal with his ex-wife: we had made room for her in our family and wondered what we should do now that they were no longer married. Due to the circumstances of the divorce, I suggested that she was still in relationship with us, and the relationship had changed. Once we learned how to navigate it, we'd feel better about the change.

These are just some of the ways my parents not only formed our family, they were living what they believed, and embodied the words of Jesus from today's Gospel lesson: "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places."

These words are often read at funerals for the obvious comfort they bring. And the author of John's Gospel did intend such comfort as Jesus spoke those words to his disciples when they were anxious about his departure, which he had just told them about. This part of John's Gospel is Jesus' final words to his disciples before his crucifixion, his death, and resurrection. It was something hard for them to understand. Which is why Thomas asked how they could follow Jesus when they didn't know where he is going. And why Jesus spoke about his Father's house. Those words aren't just words of comfort, they are intended to help provide guidance for those wondering how to follow Jesus when Jesus isn't physically present or when things change.

Which makes those words vitally necessary for us today, living in a time when there is a lot we are uncertain about. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our lives, changed them very quickly and has taken away from us so much of what we had come to depend on for our social, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. We can ask how can we worship when we can't be together and can't even be in our church building? As our senior warden wrote in a lovely letter to our parish last week, on-line worship just isn't the same as being together and we shouldn't expect it to be. As hard as we clergy and worship leaders try to provide some sort of spiritual comfort during this pandemic, it just isn't the same. Something is missing. And it is good to notice that absence.

Because that discomfort is pointing us back to the words of Jesus from today's Gospel. When Jesus' disciples were troubled, when they weren't sure how to follow Jesus through a major change that would take him away from them, he spoke to them about his Father's house.

It's important to note that the word translated *house* doesn't refer to a physical building. The word is better translated *household* or *family*. Jesus was talking about God's family, which means having many dwelling places isn't about providing literal

rooms as much as it could mean in God's family God and God's family members make room. Similar to how my family makes room for people, pets, changes, losses, newness, even uncertainties.

These aren't just words of comfort for when we die, they are words of hope for how followers of Jesus are to move forward through any circumstances, especially circumstances when we can't be certain like this global pandemic. The author of the first letter of Peter in the epistle reading for today – interpreted this concept as letting ourselves be built into spiritual houses. Again, the author of the epistle isn't talking about literal bricks and mortar, they are talking about making room for the love of God. The author of the epistle was writing to a church going through changes and uncertainty and suggested the way through was to renew their identity in Christ by making themselves into spiritual houses, people who make room for God and for others by making spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus.

Those are churchy words for making room, which sometimes means making sacrifices, giving up things like attention, or being certain or even some comforts. Making sacrifices can also mean making changes in our behaviors to accommodate the well-being of others. Right now, we are being asked to do this by sheltering in place, by not gathering in person for meetings and worship, wearing face masks when we do have to go out in public, and are being asked to give up conveniences for the sake of others.

Like the disciples, we might also be feeling uncertain about where God is this pandemic. Is God sitting in our empty Church building waiting for us to return? Is God in our homes? Or in hospitals or with the people dying alone because visitors aren't permitted in hospitals? Is God with the people who want things to go back to the way they used to be? Perhaps the answer is yes. Perhaps the answer is we don't know. Perhaps the answer is God is wherever room is being made for all of this.



Here is another way to think about it. Several years ago, my mother and I visited Cornucopia, Wisconsin, a tiny town farther north than Ashland or Bayfield. The day

we visited a local fair was going on with local vendors selling food, art, and crafts. My mother and I enjoyed the work of a local artist named Nany Raeburn so much that I bought my mother a print and my mother bought me this print. It is called, "Many Mansions". What I appreciate about it is at first glance you might think God's house is below the top roof line, but then you notice house shapes everywhere, even in the light, which tells me God's house is bigger than we imagine, because God is continually making room. If we look closer, we can see what God is making room for: households that are happy, households in crisis, households in uncertainty. There's even empty spaces for losses. This print gives me a visual understanding of how God's love can make room for the reality of life, because healing and well-being first acknowledge the pain, the uncertainty, the fear, the loss, all the things that cause troubled hearts. Once the reality is acknowledged and room is made for grief, healing can happen, and life can be renewed.

Which means, if your heart is troubled, there is room for you in God's family, and there is room for healing and growth, and change. Can you see how each dwelling looks like a house? It reminds of the advice the author of today's epistle gave for us to let ourselves be formed into spiritual houses, and together all our spiritual houses make room for God's love and all the stuff of life. This doesn't in any way condone bad or harmful behavior, but it does acknowledge the hurt caused by that behavior and makes room for forgiveness, healing, growth and that is the stuff of hope Jesus was talking about in the Gospel; hope is how we can make room for God's love and love others. Hope that is how we follow Jesus even in uncertain times. We can become spiritual houses by making room for one more and show God's love to the world because love is the stuff God's household, God's family is made of.