

Protagonist Corner

Homemaking Revisited

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I suppose if I were asked what brings most students through my office door, if there is a single something that troubles university students more than any other, I might answer "home" in its various dimensions. Many students come to me surprised and a little ashamed that they are homesick, lonely for their little brother, grandmother, parents, their own room, their own pillow. Graduate students wonder where home is, anyway. It's not really the place where and people with whom you were raised; you're supposed to be beyond all that. But the cubicle in the Graduate College dorm is not home, nor are the army barracks turned into graduate school apartments homey. Then, of course, there are the expectations from home, the disappointments from home, broken homes, split homes for many of our students. The Counselling Center has issued a report that this generation of students is having a harder time separating from home, a result, it is believed, of the complexities of modern family life. One student said to me, "when I'm here, I long for home, but when I am home, I want to come back." "There is no place like home," said Dorothy, standing in her red shoes, clutching Toto, longing to return to Kansas. But maybe for many of us there is no place that is home.

Where is home for you, and what sense does the word evoke? What first comes to mind when you think of home? For me, it is the smell of bread baking, the sound of my father's laughter, the feel of my mother's cheek, and the sight of the Allegheny and Monongehela Rivers coming together to form the Ohio, Pittsburgh. But it's also the place where I received more C's than I want to remember, was overweight through most of my adolescence, and where death has stung. Home is a place we dream we are loved and accepted. Home is a place where we hope with the poet that when we have to go there they have to take us in. And yet, our need and our longing for home is often in conflict with the reality of home. Our longing for home is deeper than our experience of home, complex, intricate, difficult.

The culture capitalizes on the gap between our longing for home and home's reality, and presents us with all kinds of pretty options for filling that gap. There is the Home section of the *New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, *Country Home*, *House and Garden*, more magazines on home than can be mentioned. *Good Housekeeping* has, at present, a particularly troubling ad campaign, full page, in the *New York Times*: a handsome, well-heeled, working, single mother is hugging her children and the magazine, which she reads in all her spare time. Then we have Ethan Allen and Laura Ashley and Country Kitchens and City Cupboards, Conrans, and Ikea to help create the perfect home. And home still leaves us with a great longing. What do we as people of faith have as a response?

The biblical witness attends to the human longing for home. Threaded throughout the Scriptures is a response to our need for a place to call our own, a landscape that is familiar. Some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible is written out of our need for and love of home. "Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east and see your children gathered from the East and the West. Sing aloud, O daughters of Jerusalem, rejoice in your heart. God will rejoice over you in gladness. God will renew you in the Lord's love. At that time God will bring you home, to a place that is promised, to a land that is your own." When early Christian communities felt forced away from the familiar, as strangers and exiles, leaders in the church began to talk about finding spiritual homelands, cities prepared by God. God knows our needs and longings, of that we can be certain.

So God asks us to stretch to expand our understanding of home beyond a longing or a place to a vision that is God's own. Jesus points us to a place where we might all be at home together, red and yellow, black and white, as the children sing it, gathered from the South and from the North as the Scriptures put it. Jesus seems to be saying that, for God's sake, there may be something more important than home as we long for it, something like making home for others, sheltering those in need, feeding those who are hungry, tucking in those who have been abandoned. God's vision of home, where all God's children are well-cared for, where all God's children know each other as sisters and brothers, a family at home. It is God's way of filling the great empty space between our longing for home and home's limitation. God gives us, not an interior decorator, but a vocation.

Jesus called the vision the kingdom of God, of course, which I heard someone call recently the kin-dom of God. We are to be about building the kin-dom of God, so that all God's children might feel like kissin' cousins. "I get it," says my colleague from Florida, "it's like this great family reunion, imagine us all around the barbeque pit, for ribs and fried chicken, cornbread, watermelon, big pitchers of tea." Then another colleague adds, "last summer we had a reunion in the town in Maine I come from. Everyone was there. It was a great clam-bake, with lobsters steamed in seaweed and corn on the cob, and beer; so imagine all God's children there, with the sun going down behind the rocky coast and the stars beginning to shine, and all of us looking up at the heavens, our shelter on a summer night and acknowledging we are all children of one God."

Our foretaste of God's kin-dom is the Christian community, where we are invited to be ourselves and feel at home. We bring our burdens and yearnings, the bitterness we sometimes feel, the sadness we have known. We are urged to bring our disappointment and despair as well as our hopes for an easier time of it. In the Christian community we gather around the table for the great feast where we are forgiven, refreshed, strengthened, and given courage. We are blessed for who we are and who we are to become, homemakers each and everyone.

Each fall sixty freshmen come to campus the week before school starts to participate in an urban renewal project called Urban Action. The students spend their days putting up sheetrock and putting down linoleum, pouring concrete basements and digging gardens, all in Trenton. They work side by

side with the folks who have bought the homes-to-be from Martin House, which sets affordable mortgages for those in need. The students hammer beside people quite different from themselves and learn how alike they are as home-makers and kin-dom builders. A student application to be a leader for Urban Action proves the point nicely: "Cortez Lamont Phillips is fourteen years old. He is black and overweight. He lives in a high crime area in Trenton and is enrolled in eighth grade in the public school. Cortez has a severe learning disability and is functionally illiterate. The strikes against Cortez pile up quickly when one views his life from a statistical standpoint. Yet, let me tell you about the Cortez I have come to know. He loves basketball. When we talk about the hoops, his eyes light up and an infectious mischievous grin lifts his flabby jowls. He is reliable and caring. As a leader of the local Boy Scout troop, he conducts weekly meetings and organizes group outings. He wants to learn to read and write. In the past year, he has mastered his name, address, the alphabet, and several simple words. He talks about going to high school and someday college. Cortez' hope is kept alive by Martin House, just a block from his home. This is where he meets friends, holds Scout meetings, and twice a week learns to read. Participating in Urban Action made my transition from home to Princeton easier. Continuing to participate in Martin House through the fall and spring terms gave value to my freshmen year."

It is God's way of filling the gap between our longing for home and home's limitation, to give us not an interior decorator, but a vocation as homemakers and kin-dom builders.