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“Finding Home”
A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)
September 15, 2013
Mark 1:1-11; Psalm 25:1-10

In her book *Letter to My Daughter*, Maya Angelou writes about the subject of home. She says:

Thomas Wolfe warned in the title of America’s great novel that “you can’t go home again.” I enjoyed the book but I never agreed with the title. I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one’s skin, at the extreme corners of one’s eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe.
(p. 6)

Maya continues:

I am convinced that most people don’t grow up. We find parking spaces and honor our credit cards. We marry and dare to have children and call that growing up. I think what we do is mostly grow old. We carry accumulation of years in our bodies and on our faces, but generally our real selves, the children inside, are still innocent and shy as magnolias... We may act sophisticated and worldly but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do. (pp. 6-7)

“Home” seems an inappropriate focus for the text from the Gospel of Mark. The author of the Gospel initiates his story by proclaiming, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And the very first incident depicted in the Gospel is about Jesus leaving home.

Jesus traveled from his home in Nazareth and entered a strange environment. He joined others making their way to a counter-cultural phenomenon called John the Baptist. Mark's Gospel describes this encounter, an encounter that included Jesus' baptism. In that specific moment of his baptism, having left home and family, Jesus heard words of acceptance and claim upon his life. In leaving home, in identifying with others, Jesus found himself "home."

Maya Angelou and the Gospel of Mark both understand "home" not as a geographic place but as an experience of belonging, of acceptance, and with that, a profound sense of identity.

For sure, not everyone has a positive association with home in their personal experience. Nevertheless, the search for home as a sense of belonging and acceptance is universal.

While the needs for belonging and a sense of identity exist within every human community at every time of history, I believe such needs are closer to the surface and more acutely felt in our community today. What typically gives shape to our sense of identity has crumbled around us.

If someone asks who you are, how do we respond? Well, usually by telling them what we do. "I'm a teacher, or lawyer, or IT professional, or in retail." What happens when you and I are unemployed?

Unemployment has been at historical highs recently. The loss of employment is not only the loss of income; it is a crisis of identity and worth. "I've been in banking for 20 years but now... I'm unemployed. Sometimes we try to soften the situation by using euphemisms: "This is pre-retirement to see if I like it." Or, "I needed to get some projects finished at home."

People who retire face similar emotional issues, but at least retirement can be anticipated and it does not hold the same stigma. The present economic downturn catches us flatfooted and completely unprepared. A significant place of refuge for our identity and worth is stripped away. Some people are physically facing homelessness because of the present crisis, but almost all find themselves emotionally homeless.

Does the baptism of Jesus, and perhaps our own baptisms – do these have any relevance to the situations in which we find ourselves today? I believe they do.

As I mentioned earlier, the story about Jesus, the very first story about him, focuses on Jesus traveling from his home in Nazareth. He enters a strange and desolate environment. In the company of ordinary people, Jesus submits to the baptism of John the Baptist.

The place and situation appear all wrong. Those being baptized were repentant sinners. By all accounts, Jesus had no need to repent. The claim by the early church was that Jesus was without sin.

This baptism story created controversy in the early church. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? The Gospel of Matthew handled this problem by depicting John the Baptist as protesting against Jesus' request to be baptized. The writer of the Gospel of John does not even mention the baptism of Jesus.

Yet Mark's Gospel unhesitatingly speaks of it. In this Gospel, Jesus identifies himself with humanity in all its neediness and brokenness.

And in doing so, words of acceptance and affirmation are uttered by a heavenly voice. Jesus finds himself "home."

It is Jesus' identification with human beings in his baptism that makes possible our identification with him in our baptism. The words spoken to and about Jesus are echoed in each of our own baptisms: "You are my child, my beloved."

Often it is difficult for us to believe such words might be uttered for us, might be true for us, even if we hope against hope for it. It is a rare moment when such a reality of acceptance and identity and claim upon our lives is experienced, and we find ourselves home.

When we find ourselves home, something extraordinary happens. Experiencing the claim of God upon our lives and God's good pleasure, having an identity and purpose – being home – all these enable us to live in and through the circumstances that beset our lives.

One of the tasks for a congregation during an interim period is for that community to examine its history, affirm its present identity, and from that to discern and plot out its future direction and possibilities for ministry. So the first steps always include reaffirming what is "home" for a congregation.

You may know the story of a man named Paul Potts. Perhaps you have had the pleasure of hearing him sing. Until 2007, Paul was completely unknown.

Paul Potts was born in Bristol, England, in 1970 to a bus driver father and a supermarket cashier mother. As a youngster, Paul was bullied because of his quiet demeanor and sensitive nature. That torment undermined his self-esteem and fed his fear of rejection. Nevertheless, at a young age, Paul knew he had a gift – his voice – and singing became for him a refuge from what was often a cruel world.

As an adult, he took on odd jobs to make a living. Yet the gift of his voice continued to be where he found solace and peace and significance. He nurtured his talent when opportunity presented itself, but circumstances and his own lack of confidence undermined its full development.

At the age of 37, Paul Potts summoned up the courage and money to appear in an audition. It was Great Britain's version of a national talent search much like "American Idol." The bad boy of talent judges, Simon Cowell, was there along with his caustic remarks and straightforward putdowns. Piers Morgan and another judge were also present.

Two thousand people were crammed into the auditorium. Included were all ages, from all walks of life. But the vast majority were teens and young adults anxious to hear the latest pop music and see who might become the next big star.

When it was his turn, Paul Potts walked out on stage in his ill-fitting \$75 suit purchased for the occasion. His stage presence communicated both awkwardness and an unspoken apology for taking up space and time in this event.

One of the judges asked him, "What are you here to do?" And he answered, "Sing opera."

Simon Cowell glanced over to Piers Morgan and they both rolled their eyes, and took a deep breath.

The music for *Nessun Dorma* came on. The ruffled and inept-looking cell phone salesman opened his mouth, and the sweetest and purist tenor voice emerged. Every note was perfect. Reaching the climax of the high notes at the conclusion of the song, every person in the auditorium was standing, clapping, and cheering. Many were wiping away tears.

Simon Cowell's mouth hung wide open in disbelief. Another judge was fighting to keep her eyes dry.

Pandemonium was breaking out in the auditorium, and it was only then that Paul Potts began to sense something new. You could see the look of a dawning realization in his eyes. He knew he had a good voice, but now he dared to believe something unbelievable – he was affirmed, he was accepted. He knew he was home.

That moment of realization on his face sends chills up my spine every time I think about it, every time I hear him sing.

His performances at the semi-final and the final were every bit as good as the original audition, and Paul Potts walked away the winner of Britain's Got Talent.

I know that winning the contest changed his life. But I am equally certain that winning was not his greatest triumph. Paul Potts found himself home.

Paul Potts may not be the next Carreras or Pavarotti. Yet there is something in the quality of his voice and in his character that allow an audience to see and experience, not merely Paul Potts performing, but music in its depth and beauty and power.

He has an ability to get out of the way so the listener is confronted with the force of the composer and the craft of the composer's work. More people will have opportunity to experience such joy because Paul Potts is "home."

The way I talk you might think I'm a big fan of opera. The truth is I have never been. However, hearing him sing has opened a door for me that was previously closed. The door of opera has opened, and I want to come in. It seemed to do that for every crowd that heard him sing in competition.

The baptism of Jesus was merely the opening scene – it was the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Great beginnings often involve leaving home and moving out into unknown territory. Great beginnings also involve finding home within.

Not long after his baptism, crowds would be attracted to this winsome preacher.

Jesus spoke in ways that allowed the love and power and grace of God to be seen through him. Doors would open that previously had been closed. And people would want to come in.

Might that happen when we find ourselves home? When we have the assurance of God's love and acceptance, might our interaction with others flow more freely because our guard is down and people are less threatening? Could the challenges in our community be engaged more fully, and comfort and mission be offered more creatively and freely? Might we live more authentically when we are confident in our identity as a child of God who belongs to the people of God?

That can happen with you and me. That can happen within this congregation. It happens when together we find what it means to be home.

Because Maya Angelou knows what it means to be home, she would write in the preface to her book:

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like... Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.
(p. xii)

Finding ourselves home, you see, is just the beginning.

The Reverend Mark E. Diehl, the Interim Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, is a Texas native. He is a 1976 graduate of Texas Tech University in Lubbock. He earned an M.Div. from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1980, and a M.S. and C.A.S. in Pastoral Counseling from Loyola College of Maryland in 1991. He was ordained into ministry in 1980, and has served churches in Arkansas; Louisiana; Maryland; as well as First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, TN; Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC; and most recently he served as Interim Pastor at Howard Memorial Presbyterian Church in Tarboro. Mark's wife, Mary, is Director of Christian Education at Howard Memorial in Tarboro, and will stay in that position while he serves here. They have three grown children, and are expecting their first grandchild in December.