

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 7, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 103:8-18,22 and Luke 9:51-58

OUR PLACES

One reason I like to fish on a lake has little to do with bass or pickerel. At age four, I learned to row a boat on Perch Lake in the Catskills. We continued to vacation there each year through the summer before I entered six grade. That spot in the Catskills became one of *my places in life*. Still today, when I am on a lake in my rowboat, I have that feeling from childhood of being in one of my places. It's not just a matter of conscious memory, of mental recall; it's more a matter of feel, of belonging, of being at peace.

In our adult forum later this morning, we will be invited to tell about some of the places in our lives that felt good and continue to trigger those good feelings when we think of them or step into a similar place. One of our eight directions for following our vision is *getting to know each other better*, and as we are creatures of both time and space, we find ourselves feeling "at home" in certain locations but "out of place" in others. The difference, of course, comes not so much from the architecture and decor (although they can give the place "a feel") as from the people and our experiences we locate in that spot or some other like it.

Places can also feel bad to us. In my junior high and high school years, contrary to my nature I think, I became quite introverted, especially in school. My church provided a good place for me, but school was another matter. To this day, when I walk through the halls of any school, I feel a twinge of junior high and high school, a faint reminder of the emotional survival mode in which I moved through school hallways in my youth. Places can recall feelings, and they don't just bring those feeling to mind; they activate the physical triggers for emotion, and we actually have the good or bad feelings we associate with the places of our past. It's more like an emotional flashback than just a mental recall. In fact, we might not even consciously be thinking about our past experiences and emotional reactions to them. Our minds may be on the business at hand, but the place still has a certain feel to it, and that "feel" comes from our life stories.

Now, what do the places of our lives have to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the faith of his followers, and the ministry of his church? We have begun recently to sing a hymn that echoes the experiences of Samuel and Isaiah in the Bible called, "Here I Am, Lord." It amuses me slightly whenever I call for someone, "Where are you?" and the person

answers, “Here.” Well, yes, wherever you are is certainly “here” to you. To myself I am always *here* not there, and always *now* not then. God meets us in the here and now. God is eternal, but the Bible shows little concern with eternity. When Psalm 103 compares the brevity of our lives to that of the flower of the field which blooms one day and withers the next, the counterpoint is the LORD God’s steadfast love which endures forever, but that steadfast love is a relational term, not just an attribute of God. It means God is there for us, and the only way God can “there for us” is to be here with us. God’s dependable love is ever-present and enduring, not “eternal” in the sense of “out there” without us. What hope, what comfort, what helpful truth would the psalm have for us if it meant only that we are here today and gone tomorrow but God endures forever? What can we say to that, except, “Too bad for us,” and, “How nice for God.” That misunderstanding of the psalm implies what the Bible denies: a terrible detachment of God from our present joys and sorrows, a distance we cannot span.

Sunrise, sunset,
swiftly fly the years,
one season following another,
laden with happiness and tears*

Jesus comes as the here-and-now embodiment of God’s ever-present love for us, of God’s compassion for the creatures whose lives are so short. God’s understanding of us is compassion, not contempt. God comes to us to heal and give life, not to punish and destroy. True, healing can involve pain, but not for the sake of cruelty. Resetting a broken bone can be painful, as in its own deeper way can emotional therapy, but the purpose is to heal, not to hurt. Jesus is God’s understanding, steadfast, redemptive love come to us in person. He confirms in the flesh what the Bible tells us, that God is ever-present for us rather than far beyond us in the eternal, unmoved by our brief joys or sorrows. And, as God is ever-present for us, then somehow (and Jesus certainly implies this) we remain ever-present to God. Jesus tells his detractors that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is God of the living, not the dead. God’s steadfast love ties us to life, to God’s own life.

Jesus is the living link or bond between those who live and die and God who lives and does not die. But the message is not merely that God never dies but that God never stops loving us. We must, in time, let go of life and leave our places behind. Psalm 103 says of the beautiful but short-lived flower, “and its place knows it no more.”

A few years ago, I returned briefly to Plainfield, New Jersey, where I was born and grew up. I drove to Frederick W. Cook School, which was my school from first through

* From “Fiddler on the Roof”

sixth grade. Behind the building is large playground that stretches to woods and a pond. That playground was my place in the summers. Much of the story of my childhood is located there. I parked for a short time across the street from the school as children were leaving and parents picking them up. They were doing the same things we had done. That was my place, but no longer. In a sense, I carry Cook School with me, but the actual Cook School remembers me no more, and I no longer belong there. In these days of suspicion and heightened security, I would not walk back to the playground where I had spent so much time and learned so much of life. I would be trespassing. What was my place is now there for other children. Even if I had walked to the back, the distance of years would have made me a stranger in my own place. I have changed and cannot be that boy again.

Why am I talking about this bit of nostalgia? We are a church, and this building, this sanctuary, is our place. We belong here, and in the sense of stewardship (rather than possession) but also of emotional attachment and community, this place belong to us. But we cannot preserve it unchanged. The Old Broad Street Church is a pristine example of the architecture of its time only because the congregation abandoned it after about forty years and built a new structure on the east side of the river. So, the old church building stood frozen in time, except, of course, for the effects of the elements and forces of nature. A living church building – that is, one being used by a church – frozen in time would be sad to the point of pathetic and unfaithful to the living God and the risen Christ.

The question, now, is not simply, “How can we maintain what we have so we can continue to feel comfortable and “at home” here in our place?” No, the question is, rather, “How can we make our place open and welcoming to strangers seeking, whether they know it or not, the steadfast love of God?” To force even the newcomers who are our own children and grandchildren into the molds of our lives and our expectations of pale immortality through them is a betrayal doomed to failure as they, of necessity, break free either by making the church their own in spite of us or by leaving it to stagnate without them. To expect newcomers to fit into our molds without making changes would be naive and self-defeating. It would be to tell them, in effect, “You may visit but, then, you may leave.”

God is present with a redemptive love that is steadfast and trustworthy. Christ calls the church ever anew to life, which means to growth, which means to change. So, the task of another of our vision directions, “Increasing member ownership of our buildings and grounds,” is not to preserve our place for ourselves, but to do the best we can to make our place welcoming, useful, and inviting to new people and new generations. The truth is that to preserve a church, we must keep changing it. What is static is dead. Our job with respect to this building in which we carry out our shared life as a community of faith is to give it a “good feel” for people looking for a place to be met by God. Amen.