**A Place Called Home** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Third Sunday of Easter The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 23; John 10:11-18 Saint Paul, Minnesota
April 14, 2024

What do you think of when you hear the words, *“home”* and *“hospitality?”*

For some, *hospitality* brings to mind bone China plates, lace-edged tablecloths, and Grandma’s silver service, gleaming after someone applied a soft cloth, a baking soda paste and elbow grease. According to dictionary.com, hospitality is *“the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.”* Through the lens of Christianity, hospitality is expansive; the table an endless serving of God’s love.

Ask yourself: What does it look like to say *“yes”* to the stranger, the *“other”* — particularly when lives and futures are at stake? What do you learn about God’s infinite hospitality when you, inevitably, become *“the other,”* and someone must decide whether to say *“yes”* to you?

These questions are interesting because they are directly related to the founding of this congregation in 1849 (almost 175 years ago) and what the first church members intended this congregation to become.

In a chapter titled, *“A House of Hope to All Who Feel Themselves Strangers in a Strange Land,”* in the excellent history of the congregation, titled, *“A Journey of Hope: The House of Hope Presbyterian Church, 1849-1999; 150 Years,”* we read:

*“In 1848, the Rev. Edward Duffield Neill, was ordained by the Presbytery of Galena, which sent him to Minnesota as a missionary in the spring of 1849. Working under the direction of the American Home Missionary Society of the New School (New Schoolers were the liberal wing of the Presbyterian Church at the time), Neil arrived in St. Paul, then a village of 300 inhabitants, on April 23rd. Seven months later, on November 26th, he organized the First Presbyterian Church and on December 5th received eight charter members. Within a few months the congregation had built a small wooden chapel at Fourth and Washington Steets on land given by Henry M. Rice.*

*“(Six years later) Neill founded another congregation on the city’s western border, House of Hope, on Christmas Eve, 1855. The first meeting of the Sunday School was December 10, 1855, with seven pupils and six teachers. In addition to Neill, there were four charter members.*

*“Speaking at the dedication of House of Hope’s new chapel, Neil observed that the charter members of House of Hope, whom he called his ‘feeble band,’ had wanted their church to be a place of refuge in a rough and often depressing frontier community. The members derived the name of the church from the* ***Voyages of de Vries,*** *a Dutch* *sea captain, who had visited Manhattan and Long Island Sound in the spring of 1639 and had then sailed north to Connecticut. On June 4th, travelling by yacht, he had reached a Dutch fortification known as ‘House of Hope,’ located near the Fresh (Connecticut River where the city of Hartford now stands. Just as ‘the Dutch redoubt in old colony times … was a House of Hope to the European traveler,’ Neill observed, so would the new Presbyterian Church in St. Paul be a haven ‘to all who feel themselves strangers in a strange land.”*

*“A haven ‘to all who feel themselves strangers in a strange land.’”*

That was the original vision—the original mission.

First Presbyterian and House of Hope merged in 1911 and moved to its present location on St. Anthony Hill in 1914 with the first worship service in this beautiful sanctuary on October 18th. To build the Sanctuary, Parish House, and Chapel, $107,000 was raised from the congregation, and $110,000 was raised through the sale of the two former church properties in St. Paul.

Google tells me that this would be approximately $6,777,604.40 in today’s dollars.

I share this with you because I am standing here before you today to suggest that the primary mission of the House of Hope in 2024 is the same as it was in 1855, to be *a haven to all who feel themselves strangers in a strange land.*

According to Bill Tammeus, the former Faith Columnist for the Kansas City Star (and fellow Presbyterian), **t**he idea that human beings are built for *relationship* is found throughout the sacred scripture of many faith traditions. Begin, for example, with the creation stories in the book of Genesis and you will discover that Adam, the first man (at least metaphorically), was lonely and pretty useless without a companion. Thus, Eve.

Even Jesus didn't do ministry as a solo job. He recruited a dozen close companions. Knowing what we know about human behavior across history, one of the miracles of the Jesus story is that [only one](https://www.theopedia.com/judas-iscariot) of those dozen disciples intentionally and permanently betrayed him.

So throughout history people have at least unconsciously understood the need for *companionship*. Among the results of efforts to meet that need: Houses of worship, social clubs, extended families, sports teams, restaurants, political parties and on and on.

Today, however, as an insightful Atlantic article makes clear, as Americans slip away from a commitment to institutional religion, they also are losing some of the very collective bodies that help to give their lives meaning. But what's worse is that what we're losing in the way of togetherness is being replaced by damaging isolation, due, in many ways, to our addiction to screen time.

As Derek Thompson of The Atlantic writes in the piece to which I've alluded, *"America didn’t simply lose its religion without finding a communal replacement. Just as America’s churches were depopulated, Americans developed a new relationship with a technology that, in many ways, is the diabolical opposite of a religious ritual: the smartphone."*

*(And lest you think I am being too judgmental, I am a chief offender—just ask my wife!).*

Our technology today not only keeps us *physically apart* but also apart *mentally* even when we're physically together. How often have you walked by a table full of people (especially but not exclusively young people) in a restaurant and noticed that almost no conversation is happening because they're all staring at their phones?

Again, Thompson: "As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in his new book, The Anxious Generation, to stare into a piece of glass in our hands is to be removed from our bodies, to float placelessly in a content cosmos, to skim our attention from one piece of ephemera to the next. The internet is timeless in the best and worst of ways — an everything store with no opening or closing times. 'In the virtual world, there is no daily, weekly or annual calendar that structures when people can and cannot do things,' Haidt writes. In other words, digital life is disembodied, asynchronous, shallow and solitary."

“It strikes me,” said Tammeus, “that many religious congregations don't fully understand or value the *togetherness* they offer others. If the divine plan was to create people for deep relationships, and if those relationships are life-giving and life-sustaining, faith communities should be demonstrating why that's so and why people need such connections.”

Which brings us at long last to our scripture readings for today (likely too long for many of you!)—Psalm 23 and John 10. As Susan Andrews, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, has wisely said: (These texts) *“offer us several images of God as home. God is both shepherd and host, pasture and valley, mansion, and fortress, still water and open gate. Whatever the circumstances of our lives, God is with us--in peace, in war, in hope, in fear, in life, in death, in joy, in suffering. When we are at home with God, even the most difficult days are infused with abundant life … But the reverse is also true. God needs and wants to be at home in us. God needs and wants to abide in us.”*

Author Joyce Rupp recounts an Ethiopian legend about a shepherd boy named Alemayu. One night he was stranded on a frozen mountain, clothed only in a thin wrap. When he arrived back home, the villagers were amazed that he had survived so well. When asked to explain he said, *"The night was bitter. When all the sky was dark, I thought I would die. Then far, far off I saw a shepherd's fire on another mountain. I kept my eyes on the red glow in the distance, and I dreamed of being warm. And that is how I had the strength to survive."* Hope is the home within us, the home where God lives, the home where God abides.

Or, differently said, the church, at its best, as its intended, is *“A haven ‘to all who feel themselves strangers in a strange land.’”*

Rest, restoration, and security are the promises of scripture. And they are promised even and especially in the midst of enmity, danger, and death.

But such blessed assurance comes with a *price.* We come to trust a dependable God only when we embrace a dependable discipline. In Acts we learn that the Pentecost church grew through devotion and discipline. Day by day the new converts spent time together in the temple. Day by day they broke bread at home and ate with glad and generous hearts. Day by day they praised God, sold their possessions, and distributed the proceeds according to need. And day by day, God added to their number, and added abundantly to their already abundant life. *(It’s mostly about showing up!).*

In other words, once we have restored and been restored at home, (our spiritual home) we can then go forth to give care and attention and honor to the world.

Friends, our Capital Campaign is about much more than a building and a new HVAC system. It’s about extending House of Hope’s (almost 175 year) legacy as *“A haven ‘to all who feel themselves strangers in a strange land’”* well into the future. It’s about people. It’s about hospitality. It’s about relationship. It’s about connection. It’s about creating community across every kind of difference. Nothing could be more important in today’s fractious society. Our community needs us, and we need them.

*That* is a vision for mission and ministry that could keep us busy and focused for the next several decades for those willing to embrace it.