

Tracy Daub
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Mark 1:14-15; Mark 10:13-16; Mark 12:28-34

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS:
FINDING OUR HOME IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The much loved movie, *The Wizard of Oz* tells the story of a young girl, Dorothy, who is transported to the fantastical world of Oz and, together with her three new friends, endeavors to find her way back home again. The unfolding odyssey of adventures, dangers, and obstacles that take place in the pursuit of this quest turn this story into a metaphor for the *human* story. After all, "home" is also our cherished destination in our own journeys through life. We all long to find that place of belonging, that place where we are accepted, loved, and feel safe and feel complete. From the beginning of time, humans have carved out territories they claim as their home, and have fought and died defending these places from others. Immigrant peoples forced to leave their land of birth may pine away for their homeland and hold tight to traditions, customs, and foods that make them feel at home. Home is also a destination for many of us at the holidays, as we re-unite with family for Christmas and New Years. When Bing Crosby or Perry Como croon out their holiday classics, *I'll be Home for Christmas* or *There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays*, we are reminded that even if we physically can't get home for the season, our hearts are at least oriented in that direction.

And yet, home as a destination may elude us. Some of us may not have enjoyed a happy childhood home or our current home life is filled with pain and conflict. Or maybe our sense of home was lost to us when our beloved one died. Maybe we cannot return home because the place we recall as home is simply no longer there--destroyed in a fire or torn down to make way for a shopping center. Think of all those people who have lost their homes in the disasters of

recent months. Perhaps "home" was an experience we had for one specific moment in time but is now gone with the passage of years.

Yesterday we held the memorial service for Norma Wagner. Norma had the unusual distinction of having lived all of her 91 years in the same home. And there was nowhere else she wanted to be. She was adamant even in her declining health that she wanted to remain in her home. And in the absence of any living relatives, the members of this church stepped in and did their best to help fulfill Norma's desire--taking her to medical appointments, securing help for her at home to assist her with daily living, paying her bills. But then in the spring a medical emergency sent her to the hospital and it became evident that her failing health would not permit her to return home. This news was a severe grief to Norma and she never reconciled herself to this situation. In the last conversation I had with Norma at the hospice unit two days before her death, she was bedridden, on oxygen, barely able to talk, and she turned and asked me, "Could you take me home?" It was not a desire I was capable of fulfilling.

Home can be an elusive quest. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, our lives may be an odyssey in pursuit of that place of belonging and completeness, only to encounter obstacles of one kind or another standing in our way. We may marry a person thinking they will fill our longing for home. We may have children in hopes they will give us a sense of home. We may fill our houses with beautiful possessions in an effort to feel at home. And yet the sense home may still seem remote. And then we may turn to drugs and alcohol and other behaviors to dull the pain of its absence.

Into this condition of brokenness and pain comes God with a gift. God brings home to us. God gives us a new place in which we can dwell. It is a place of belonging and a place of meaning and it's called the Kingdom of God. Just what do we mean when we speak about the

Kingdom of God? Kingdoms are typically political realms run by a monarch. When Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God in Mark's gospel, it is clear that the disciples envision this kind of kingdom, in which God would bring about a new political reality for them, mainly by overthrowing their Roman oppressors and restoring Israel to its former prominence. Jesus, however, was speaking about a very different kind of kingdom.

Close your eyes and imagine what the world would look like if it were organized according to God's will. What does the world look like? We might imagine a place where everyone has enough to eat, all people are respected and treated fairly, where people work peaceably to resolve conflicts, where the community ensures its most vulnerable members are cared for. Our imaginations, limited as they may be, give us something of a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God may look like. The Old Testament prophets offered us similar visions. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming of a new heaven and a new earth when the world will be re-created according to God's intentions for justice and prosperity and peace (Isaiah 65). And so we come to understand that the Kingdom of God is not really so much a *place* as it is a condition--a condition of our hearts and minds and souls that then give rise to certain conditions in our world.

The first act of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark, after his baptism and wilderness temptation, his first act of ministry was to announce that "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) The gospel writer of Mark is giving us a clue here: the Kingdom of God has come near to us in the person of Jesus. And Jesus' summons to us to "repent, and believe in the good news," is an invitation to turn our lives around and make our home in the Kingdom of God.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus not only ushers in God's Kingdom, but Jesus *embodies* God's Kingdom. That means that when we look at Jesus, at what he does and what he says, we see the

Kingdom of God. In Mark's account, Jesus shares a few parables explicitly about the Kingdom of God--those parables that begin with: "the kingdom of God is like . . ." and then he tells a story that teaches us something about the Kingdom of God. But mostly in Mark's gospel, we learn about the Kingdom of God in a round-about way, by watching what Jesus does and what he says. And usually, we are shocked and surprised by what Jesus teaches us about God's kingdom.

For example, when told that his mother and brothers and sisters were outside waiting to see him, Jesus responds by declaring, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And then he adds, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:33) This would have been a radical statement in a society where family was the central social unit, the foundational entity of belonging. In other words, Jesus' statement would have been a direct assault on their understanding of "home." Now, Jesus' pronouncement did not mean that he was against families. What he was doing, however, was offering a new *concept* of home--a new notion of where our ultimate and most secure place of belonging can be found: in the Kingdom of God.

The radical nature of this new home of ours is revealed especially by the kinds of people Jesus noticed and included. When he touched lepers, healed the blind or the sick, drove out demons, included women--all of whom were social outcasts or devalued members of society--Jesus demonstrated not only that the Kingdom of God is made up of the most shocking kinds of people but that compassion and acceptance are core features of God's intended home of ours. Jesus taught that in the realm of God the first are last and the last are first, and that those who want to be great must give themselves in service. But even after demonstrating this kind of radical inclusion over and over again, the disciples still failed to understand. Mark shares the story of people who brought children to Jesus for him to bless and how the disciples tried to shoo

them away. Children were the least powerful members of society and occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder. In a society grounded in reciprocity and the notion of, "I'll do for you if you do for me," children brought nothing of value to the table. So of course, the disciples tried to drive off these little annoying nobodies. Jesus was far too important to spend his time with them. We are told that when Jesus saw what the disciples were doing, "he was indignant." In rejecting these children, his disciples had totally missed the whole point of his ministry. Taking the children in his arms he tells the disciples, "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Jesus was not sentimentalizing little kids--who in truth can be annoying at times! He was, however, proclaiming that the home we are invited to live in, this Kingdom of God, is intended for the least powerful and the most vulnerable people. That may be children, or refugees, or people on welfare, or undocumented workers. And that may be you and me, when at times we are made vulnerable by life's hardships or brought low by our own darkness. Jesus tells us that we have a home in God's realm of compassion, love, and acceptance.

But how to get there? How do we find this home? Where is this Kingdom of God? One of the religious leaders comes to Jesus and asks him which of the commandments is the greatest. Jesus answers with what were two familiar commandments: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And the religious leader affirms Jesus' answer, and in fact, this religious leader adds that these two commandments are more important than any of the elaborate religious rituals people carry out at the Temple, where he himself makes a living. And when Jesus heard how well this man answered, Jesus says to him "You are not far from the kingdom of God." In other words, we find

our way into the Kingdom of God by loving God with all our lives and by loving our neighbor--all of our neighbors, especially the vulnerable ones. *That's* the way in.

Science fiction and fantasy literature sometimes use a concept of a portal to move their characters into a new domain. These portals serve as a kind of a doorway, an entrance to a new world. In C.S. Lewis' famous novel, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, three siblings discover that they can enter a completely new world by walking through the back of an old wardrobe. If they push passed the coats and garments hanging in this ordinary household piece of furniture, they can discover a portal to the fantastical world of Narnia.

Imagine that the Kingdom of God is something like a portal--a portal to a new world--God's world--and a new life--the life God intends for us. We step through that portal and enter our new home, the Kingdom of God, whenever we love God with all our being and whenever we love our neighbor. Imagine that there are portals everywhere around us, all over, throughout our daily lives. You go to school--there's a portal. At work, there's a portal. Standing in line at the grocery store--what do you know! There's a portal. A neighbor loses his spouse--there's a portal. A kid in your child's class can't afford to go on the school trip--there's a portal. You are disturbed by what a new government policy will do to low-income families? There's a portal. It's like the Kingdom of God is this parallel universe with portals to this other domain all around us. We just have to see them and walk through, which we do anytime we offer grace, forgiveness, compassion, generosity, justice, and acceptance. And when we do, we will be transported to our true home.

At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy discovers that the ruby red slippers on her feet are in fact her portal home. All she has to do is click her heels together three times and say "There's no place like home," and she will be transported home again. It turns out that

throughout her whole odyssey, she had the means to go home with her the entire time. And so do we. We have the means to go home right with us. Loving God and loving our neighbor offers us the way home. It will not guarantee us a problem-free life. In fact, doing both usually stirs up a fair amount of trouble. But it will ground our lives in meaning and offer us a place of belonging in the heart of God.

I would have given anything to find a way for Norma to die at home, where she wanted to be. Given the realities of her health situation, that was just not possible. But while we could not physically get her home, the members of this church did their best to offer her an emotional home through our love, and through our care, and through our visits. It may not have been sufficient, or complete, or perfect. Human love never is. But when I would visit Norma and would tell her that we at church loved her and considered her our family, she would be overcome with emotion. So, I think in some way we enabled her to feel the gift of God's love--which is, in the end, our one true home.