

“You Know You’re Home When . . . “

Romans 13:8-14

Richard C. Allen

September 7, 2014

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

On facebook, there’s an opportunity to complete a sentence that begins, “You know you’re from Glastonbury when...” I get a kick out of that, though I’ve never contributed to it. If I WERE to contribute, I’d say: you know you’re from Glastonbury if your first date was at the bowling alley in the basement of the One Stop Shopping Plaza. Or: you know you’re from Glastonbury if you can name the families who once lived in the houses in South Glastonbury village that are now banks and beauty parlors and bakeries. Or, you know you’re from Glastonbury if you once drew water from Marian Standish’s well.

We’ll let that be a lead-in to today’s sermon: “You Know You’re Home When . . . “ I’ve always thought of the church as a spiritual home, different from the homes where we sleep, but home in a sacred sense.

So, I’ve been thinking about how we know when we’re home, when our church is that place where we know we ARE somebody who is made in the divine image; where we ARE somebody who has a purpose; where we ARE somebody who matters.

The Apostle Paul was so concerned about this very matter: that people of all ages would experience their church as a spiritual home. In his letter to the Romans, he told the church people that all of the laws and all of the prophets boil down to just one essential: to love one’s neighbor. When that one truth is embodied and lived, then a church becomes a home, a safe place for working out one’s salvation. A pastor’s work is to keep on raising up this basic teaching. Love your neighbor.

You know you've found a church home when somebody remembers your name or wants to know your name. All the Gospel writers take time to list the names of the first twelve disciples. They have names! And that matters because when you know someone's name you have begun a relationship. Early in the film, *Good Will Hunting*, young Will manages to get the phone number of a young woman he meets in a Cambridge establishment. A phone number is good; but a NAME is way better!

I remember coming home from college for a Christmas holiday and when my sister Debbie saw me come through the front, she hollered with her full lung capacity, "Ningy's home!" I never did like the nickname Ningy, but hearing that name of affection ring through the front hallway of 57 Western Avenue left no doubt I had reached home!

Local churches are communities where relationships matter, where knowing and being known are considered sacred agendas, where it's okay to say, 'I know you told me your name, but could you tell me again? I forgot.' Names carry meaning. Sophia means 'wisdom.' Isaac means 'child of laughter.' Clarke was my grandfather's first name, my middle name, my son's middle name, and now my grandson's middle name. When somebody addresses you by name, it's the beginning of a friendship. You may have found a church home.

You know you've found a church home, when somebody takes the time to hear your story. I am convinced that before we die, we all want somebody to know us, to know our whole story: that we were born in Wisconsin, that our parents adopted us, that we once climbed Mt. Monadnock, that we once kayaked on the Allagash River, that we once won the spelling B contest at High Street School.

In some mysterious way, we experience a healing, a wholeness, a kind of salvation when somebody takes the time to listen to our story, our life story. This can happen in a church home. It can happen at a women's retreat, at a men's breakfast, in a Bible class, after a choir rehearsal, in the hallway, on a mission trip, in a farmer's field while gleaning eggplant.

Jesus modeled this for us when he met the Samaritan woman at the village well. Though he had miles to go before he slept, he took time to listen to a woman's life story. Having been heard, this woman tells her neighbors she's never felt so alive in her entire life. She invites them to come and meet a man who has time to listen to your whole story: the good, the bad, and the ugly. So, when someone says to you, 'let's have coffee, I'd like to hear more about your summer tour with Up With People or your recent stint in Afghanistan or your secret recipe for strawberry rhubarb pie; you know you've found a church home.

Thirdly, you know you've found a church home when you realize your definition of neighbor has been broadened. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome urging them to love their neighbor, he was really challenging them to draw a much wider circle, to embrace a much more diverse population, to break out of the small-minded thinking that reduces the neighbor to people who live on one's own street. He urges this because he knows that abundance of life has something to do with embracing a wide definition of neighbor.

Paul was a traveler. The Acts of the Apostles traces three missionary journeys that took him to Greece, Italy, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, and Islands of the Mediterranean. He had encountered Jews and Gentiles, Armenians and Arabs, Egyptians and Ethiopians, fabulously wealthy and dirt poor, slaves and slave masters, women and men, magicians and believers.

What he sees is how his own life has been enriched as he has broken out of his own parochial thinking regarding who is his neighbor. It's in loving the rich variety of people he meets on his journeys that he discovers the deeper meaning of the Great Commandment to love the neighbor.

Some of you here today have known this joy when you welcomed refugee families into your homes from Vietnam, or from Bosnia, or from Azerbaijan. Some of you here today have known this joy when you served a meal at Peter's Retreat in Hartford. Some of you here today have known this joy as you ministered unto Haitian refugees in the Dominican Republic. Some of you here today have known this joy as you volunteer in the Jewish Literacy Program.

As you sense your definition of neighbor broadening, you know you've found a church home.

Lastly, you know you've found a church home when you've discovered YOUR particular gift is valued here. I love it when parents have their children take out the trash, fold the laundry, chop the peppers, mow the grass, pray a table blessing, wash the windows; in a nutshell: contribute to the family economy. This is how I first knew I belonged in our extended family, growing up. On grandfather's farm, I picked blueberries, shoveled mulch, dug stones out of plowed fields, pinched potato bugs, and eventually drove the coveted Ferguson 30 tractor! I would go to bed at night convinced that Grandpa Clemmer couldn't possibly run the farm without me. On reflection, I see that he intended for me to draw that conclusion. It's what made me feel I was at home.

A church is like that. It becomes your spiritual home when the gifts you offer are received and valued and employed for the glory of God. You may have never heard of Lyle Blackburn. He was the head football coach of the Green Bay Packers before that other guy, Vince Lombardi, took over.

Lyle Blackburn was a member of our church in Lancaster, Wisconsin. He was gifted in placing players in the right places on the field so they could catch a pass or make a block or run for a touchdown.

Well into his 80's, after church on one of my first Sundays there, coach Blackburn approached me near the back of the long, carpeted aisle, took me by the hand, led me closer to the huge front doors, and said: 'young fella, you'll greet ALL of the people coming from both directions if you park yourself over here!' Bless his heart! He was using his coaching talent to make me a more effective pastor. He had found his church home.

You know you're home when somebody calls you by name; when somebody takes time to listen to your story; when your concept of neighbor is blown out of the water, and when you find yourself in the thick of the church's economy. This homecoming sermon I offer up in the greatest of hope! Amen!