



THE FOURTH PILLAR: A HOME IN THE CITY

November 17, 2019, Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

Psalm 84; Revelation 21:1-4

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There have been at least two influential Presbyterian ministers named Fred. One is, of course, Fred Rogers, whose simple and profound gentleness helped children and adults feel loved and valued in his presence. The other is Frederick Buechner, whose eloquent writing and wise wonder has helped many experience the mystery and deep ache for meaning in the life of faith.

This past week, I found myself returning to a book by Frederick Buechner, one from which I quoted as recently as August. Though it has been on my shelf for at least two decades, for some reason it has beckoned me more than once here in New York City. Its title is **Longing for Home**, and I hasten to say that I have not reached for it out of homesickness in a conventional sense. No, the longing for home in this book is a theological longing and while “home” may very well be some actual address somewhere, it is more profoundly ‘home’ in the deepest theological sense that word can bear.

In the winter of 1953, Buechner was a twenty-seven-year old bachelor living in New York City, trying to write a novel that refused to come to life. Next door to where he lived was a church. And the church was Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church and the pastor was George Buttrick. Depressed about his novel and with time on his hands, Buechner, who was not a regular churchgoer, began going to hear George Buttrick preach. Frederick Buechner writes that Buttrick seemed to be a true believer, which, in his experience many preachers are not. (!) His description of Buttrick’s preaching was that it possessed an “oddly ragged eloquence.” He could take words you had heard all your life, Buechner said, and make you hear the holiness in them as though for the first time.¹



Toward the middle of that December, Buttrick said that the week before, on the church steps, he happened to overhear someone asking somebody else, “Are you going home for Christmas?” Then Buttrick, his eyeglasses glittering in the lectern’s light, peered out at the people listening to him in that large, dim sanctuary and asked it again—“Are you going home for Christmas?”—and Buechner said that he asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to Buechner’s eyes. Because he understood that Buttrick meant, Are you going “home,” to “the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.” He understood then that ‘home’ is where Christ is.

The Fourth Pillar of The Brick Presbyterian Church is: Fellowship. We intend to offer, to be: A Home in the City. This fourth pillar, like the others, is deeply biblical.

Think of how the Bible begins—what is God doing? Moving over the face of a great void, a watery chaos, speaking into being light and darkness, a dome of sky above, dry ground and seas beneath, lush vegetation and all manner of creaturely life, then human beings. God sets us within a garden to live and flourish. In Genesis, then, God is making a “home” for us; home abundant and permanent. But we know what happens next—estrangement, expulsion to a life marked by boundaries and consequences and a persistent, deep longing for home: the one we lost and with it, our close connection to God and all to living things.

Next, turn literally to the center of the Bible, to the Book of Psalms to Psalm 84, in fact, and you hear the song of a pilgrim, remembering the sights and sounds of the temple in Jerusalem, the very dwelling place of God. The longing for home is set to music here. The psalmist longing to be in the temple, at home with God, hearing praises sung in community; watching sparrows build their nests in the safety of its columns and crevices, for they are at home with God there. The psalmist addresses “the Lord of Hosts”—that is, the commander of armies celestial and earthly, who wields ferocious power and might among the nations—yet is also the God who watches over tiny, vulnerable nesting birds. In this dwelling place, the psalmist



longs to be at home. He would rather live one day there than a thousand anywhere else.

Next, stop by John's Gospel, and you will find Jesus promising his disciples on their last night together: 'In my Father's house,' Jesus tells them, 'there are many dwelling places'—ah, there it is again. 'And I am going to prepare a place for you. So that where I am, you may be also. Home, you see, is where Christ is.

Then go farther still in Scripture, to the end of all things—to Revelation chapter 21—and read there the beautiful vision that sums up all that is to come: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his peoples." God, will be so close to us and we to God that tears, sorrow, sighing, mourning, pain, death—all of it God wipes away from our faces. At home, fully again and finally, the perfect garden becomes the perfected city, the new Jerusalem.

In tis meantime, in imperfect ways, we intend to be A Home in the City; this city of New York. This deeply faithful pursuit is deeply needed.

Over the last few years, countries around the world have been studying loneliness. It turns out that loneliness—the feeling of lacking or losing companionship—is a public health concern; some say it is an epidemic. In Japan, lonely deaths among the elderly have a name, Kodokushi. A British Commission on Loneliness in 2017 found that 9 million people, 14 percent of the population—often or always feel lonely. In January of 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed that country's first Minister for Loneliness. Loneliness costs U.K. employers up to \$3.5 billion annually and a Harvard Business Review essay cited a study that said social isolation is "associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day."ⁱⁱ In May 2018, Cigna Health released results from a national survey of more than 20,000 Americans ages 18 and older. It explored the impact of loneliness in the United States.



The results parallel what other countries are finding. Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out (46 percent and 47 percent, respectively). Two in five Americans sometimes or always feel their relationships are not meaningful and they are isolated from others. Only 53 percent of Americans report having meaningful in-person social interactions, like an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with family on a daily basis. And Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) is the loneliest generation and claims to be in worse health than older generations. Cigna sums it up—we are seeing a lack of human connection.ⁱⁱⁱ This makes our church theme this year seem even more important and urgent: Divine Connections. We need them. With God, with each other. People who are less lonely have regular, meaningful, in-person interactions. Their mind-body health improves and their feelings of threat and fear lessen. Opportunities to volunteer alleviate loneliness. Colleges are building more communal spaces to mitigate isolation. Some communities are stressing the importance of funding for public libraries, teen centers, and other public gathering places.

I know, it is hard for many to imagine loneliness being a problem in a city as crowded and bustling as New York. But it is here, too, and maybe especially here. Suzanne Guthrie, an Episcopal priest, describes hearing, in the deepest part of the night, the voice of her own loneliness. She was walking on cobblestones somewhere in Greenwich Village with friends after a concert when she heard the sound of a lone jazz saxophone. She said, “The player was invisible. No detectable movements came from doorways or basement stairs. The music filled the cavern above the narrow street, echoing as it might in a cathedral. ... Here in the city,” she continued, “this sound of beauty and sadness, perfection and longing played upon 100 windowsills in solitude. ... This cry in the night seemed to contain the essence of time itself ... This music belonged alone to this moment of solitude on this city street. This voice was a prayer rising to its god. ... This sound taught me,” she said, “to recognize the cavern of emptiness within myself. ... Especially that unnamed and infinite longing that eclipses all other longings, the longing for God...”^{iv}



In every new member class, Doug tells those joining us that this City is big and wonderful and calls forth from us our best. But it also can be isolating, competitive, exhausting, and yes, lonely. Here, he emphasizes, we want to bring our real selves, share our deep questions, joys and heartaches. We want to know what is happening in each other's lives so we can pray for one another, offer support and care. 'Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep,' as Paul once put it. When Melanie and I were walking home one night, she mentioned the way some people look sometimes through you, isolated on a busy sidewalk. And sometimes people look at you, with a kind of longing, an unspoken plea for connection because they are lonely, or maybe things aren't going well with that novel, or they just have time on their hands. Or they are lost, really lost.

Our speaker last Sunday in Adult Education urges churches to consider doing "less" but to go deeper in the things we keep. People, he said, are looking for connection and for meaning. A Public Library is great and so is a park bench...but a church can be more; and should be more.

Anne Lamott recounts a story her pastor, Veronica, once told. That when she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'" Lamott reflected: "That is why I have always stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their voices, I can always find my way home."^v

Like the most interesting southern homes, this home has its share of eccentricities and pockets of dysfunction. But that just gives us something to work on—or at least talk about! This home has its shared sacred stories and gathers regularly around the table, always making room for new family members. This home has



known times of plenty and want, of joy and sorrow, of sickness and health; and it is in the want, sorrow, and sickness that our commitment is most tested and most needed. Because this is neither the Garden of Eden nor the new Jerusalem, this home depends on copious amounts of patience, forgiveness, grace and hope. The Fourth Pillar of the Brick Church is to be A Home in the City. It is the best reason I can think of to support this place with your money, your time, and your best efforts. Because in a hundred locations in this dwelling place, the generations gather and small, in-person connections and conversations happen. Loneliness is alleviated; well-being is strengthened; and our life is extended by living it together. And above all and through all and in all, Christ is present; and there is home.

Amen.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, **The longing for Home** (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 23-24.

ⁱⁱ Tara John, "How the World's First Loneliness Minister Will Tackle 'the Sad Reality of Modern Life,'" in *Time Magazine*, April 25, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cigna.newshq.businesswire.com

^{iv} Suzanne Guthrie, "Praying my loneliness" in *The Christian Century*, November 11, 1992.

^v Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith** (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 55.