

## Home

John 15:9-17

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May 13, 2012

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The Gospels, of course, are laced with the language of love. We see love demonstrated on page after page. A parent welcomes a prodigal child home with a hug that can not possibly be misunderstood. A stranger comes to the aid of one who's been beaten and robbed with expressions of love that can not be misunderstood. A woman, early in her pregnancy, visits a kinswoman who is also expecting a baby. As the women talk, it is an unmistakable love they share. If it's a good love story you're hoping to find, skip right over all those romance novels in the bookstore, and get right to the Gospel narratives. The love stories there are the kind that raise goose bumps on your flesh.

L-o-v-e takes me right to another four letter word: h-o-m-e. Love is what makes a house a home. And what is love anyway? As soon as we begin to define it, we see how inadequate language is. Love's definition is more likely to be found in a demonstration than in a dictionary. Jesus understood this quite well. He was famous for demonstrating love and then saying something like: Go and do likewise. His demonstrations were bold and groundbreaking; they were memorable and formative; they changed the world forever. Though his sermons and teachings are inspiring and life-giving, I find his demonstrations of love to be what causes me to choose to be a Christian.

Allow me to share with you three such demonstrations of love. Each one happens to unfold in the context of a home. We see in each story that the home is where love is modeled most forcefully.

The first is found in that beloved story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who is short in stature, short on business ethics, and short on friendships. He climbs a sycamore tree, goes out on a limb to catch a glimpse of Jesus. As Jesus approaches the sycamore tree, he looks up and sees in the tax collector's eyes a terrible loneliness, a dark despair, a hunger for somebody to love him. Jesus sees right into this man's soul and says, 'Let's go to your house and have a little chat.' As they talk and listen, the house becomes a home. I picture them at the kitchen table. They are open and honest with each other. No secrets are kept. One tells his story of woe; the other listens with the ears of compassion. In the end, Zacchaeus knows one thing for sure: he's been loved. And that makes all the difference! His life will never be the same.

I'm big on kitchen tables. Love flows freely at the kitchen table. It's where a mother can tell her son how handsome he is. It's where a dad can tell his daughter how precious she is. It's where any lingering doubts about being loved can be erased. I know there are formal dining room tables and there are TV tables and end tables; but I favor a kitchen table. It's the location where a house becomes a home.

The second love demonstration takes place in the house of a family of three: two sisters and a brother; Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Lazarus has just died. And news of the death has reached Jesus and his friends. By the time he arrives at the house, the neighbors have gathered and there is a lot of ritualized wailing going on. Martha runs out of the house to meet Jesus as he comes up the walk. Her grief is written all over her face. The grief is complicated by some anger. "Where have you been?" she demands! "If you had been here, my brother would still be alive." Her sorrow and her rage are intermingled. I picture the two of them sitting down on the front step. And there, Jesus takes out his hanky and he weeps his own tears. No words are spoken, he simply weeps.

This is the shortest verse in the whole Bible. Two words. Jesus wept. In his weeping with Martha, the house becomes a home. It is now a sacred space where tears have been co-mingled. By the end of this story, Martha knows one thing for sure: she has been loved.

I am big on front steps, or stoops as they are sometimes called, or porches, those angular approaches into the house where two people can sit comfortably for a little while. It's a place where a brother can say to a sister, "I think I'm in love with Jennie," or "I dream of being a neuro-surgeon." It's a place where a sister can say to a brother, "My boyfriend broke up with me," or "I'll never get a passing grade in Biology." Tears of joy and tears of sorrow can leak out on a front porch, making a house into a home. Some houses are just houses. It's the ones where we know we're loved that become homes.

A third demonstration of love happens in the story of the healing of the Syrophenician's daughter. Jesus had entered a house in the region of Tyre and Sidon, a house he hoped would serve as a retreat. He was in need of a little R & R. But things rarely work out that way. A woman from a distant land, who worshiped some other god, tracked him down. She was desperate. Her daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, which means anything from a tummy ache to a brain tumor to a mental illness. She had been to the doctors, but to no avail. In desperation, she tracks Jesus down and bursts into the house. Without a courtesy knock, she plows right into the teacher's study insisting that he heal her daughter on the spot.

Just starting to wind down from a hectic schedule, he is not thrilled to see this Syrophenician woman. Nevertheless, she pleads her case! She won't rest until her daughter is healed. In this little retreat house, Jesus is moved by this mother's affection. He is moved by her perseverance.

He is moved by her single-minded determination to go to bat for her girl no matter the cost, no matter how awkward a situation she creates, no matter whose rest and recreation she interrupts. This woman has chutzpah!

He is able to heal the daughter not so much to get this mother off his back, but because her love is so palpable. He can not withhold his love from the wounded child another moment. I contend that in that moment, when love trumped convenience, that little retreat house became a home.

A home is where we put our own needs aside and tend to the wounds of the other. From the mother who kisses an owie, to the father who pulls out a splinter, to the grandparent who teaches sobriety, to the uncle who speaks a word of forgiveness, to the aunt who rubs ice over the swollen bee sting; a Christian home is one where wounds of all descriptions begin to heal, where love is a tourniquet or a sling or a massage or a bowl of chicken noodle soup. Healing begins whenever someone chooses to love.

Today we are celebrating the Festival of the Christian Home. I am confident that those demonstrations initiated by Jesus continue on Old Maid's Lane and Tryon Street; on Lake View Drive and on Chestnut Hill Road; on Little Acres Road and Coleman Road, along Buttonball and all the way to Covenant Village and Coventry and Manchester and Vernon and wherever people of faith transform their houses into homes. This is what I wanted to say today in the greatest of hope. Amen.