

“What Cannot Be Seen” / 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 / 10 June 2012

My eccentric bachelor uncle died about a year ago. I was always his favorite, and he used to promise me that I would inherit his house. Drive by the place, on the gravel cemetery lane, and you'll think it's just another abandoned house, with its worn out shingle siding, its long-overgrown shrubs, its uncared-for look. Just a little gray house with chipped green paint at the window frames, a screen door dangling in the breeze. It stands in the shade of sugar maples. It's a tiny place, too. You could easily drop that whole house inside the entry hall and parlor of my farmhouse in South Fayette. No daylilies in bloom, not a single flowerbed, no concrete birdbaths, not so much as a pink flamingo in the yard. It's just a weathered little place, at the edge of a weathered little town. It hasn't been anyone's home in years.

Walk around the house, down to the big side yard. But watch your step; like most things around here, this place is on a slant. See the big rectangle where the grass doesn't grow like it should. That's where the vegetable garden used to be. The scars in the earth tell how the garden got smaller and smaller every year, as the hands that planted it grew older. There are old windowpanes on a wooden box frame; that's where the seedlings grew, an Appalachian greenhouse. Two clothesline poles stand like iron crosses, made from some indestructible metal. They'll stand for another hundred years, mute witnesses to decades of laundry, loads of “Carharts,” factory work clothes that got washed every day at the end of the shift, then hung out to dry in the sun. Poke around the property, and you'll find a tool shed filled with old gadgets, watering cans, gas cans, old cans of Wolf's Head and Pennzoil—oozing their slimy brown contents. The rototiller and lawnmower look like they haven't been touched since the day before Chernobyl. A 22-foot ladder lies on the near the basement door, just waiting for someone to hoist it up and clean out the gutters—where little sugar maples are sprouting.

If you think things are desolate out here, just step inside. Push past the broken screen door, swaying in the wind, take a deep breath and turn the tarnished doorknob. It's worse than you imagined. This is the place where Uncle Ken lived out his last days with an ancient cat named Henry, a cat so fat it could pass for a striped groundhog. He didn't just live out his *last* days here; he lived his whole life here. The front room is crowded with years of debris: great heaps of unopened mail, Christmas cards, birthday cards, wedding invitations, never opened. There are old magazines, some of them are about God and others are about hunting, a pastime Ken hadn't pursued in decades. There's junk mail from old time televangelists who haven't been on the air since I was a teenager: Rex Humbard, Ernest Angely, Oral Roberts. Dirty clothes, smudged and broken furniture, old brown-and-white photos of unsmiling ancestors, their names lost to history. Trinkets, memorabilia of bygone days. There are at least 60 Bibles of different sizes, and colors, and translations. Be careful poking around in here; there's a loaded handgun under the couch, where Ken slept in front of the TV. And one in the bedroom, where he hadn't set foot in years. And one in the hutch near the front door. There are shotguns, and .22s, and muzzle-loaders. There are antique children's toys, made of metal, not plastic. The cupboards and drawers are still stuffed with long-expired medications, and sewing curios, dried up ink pens, and crocheted potholders—all dating back to the days when the house still knew a woman's touch. The plates and dishes are made of green glass, a telltale sign that they've been around since the Great Depression. And there's a stretched out coke bottle, circa 1975. It's a place of cat hair, and dust, and devastation.

That can be clearly seen. Look very closely, and you might see traces of the tidy-if-humble home that it was when Ken's parents still lived there.

After Ken's mother died, he lived like a recluse until his own death, 11 years later. He never allowed anyone inside the house. He met people at the door, and if the visitor was family, he offered to take them down to a coffee shop to talk, but the house was off limits. The family waited 11 years to sort through their grandmother's things. It was a part of the grieving process that had been denied them. And when they finally got inside the house, they found that the delayed bereavement was nothing compared to the bizarre mess they had to clean up. And it had always been such a spotless little place.

I think about that neglected homestead when I read the Apostle's words to the church at Corinth. He says: "Do not lose heart. We do not look at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." Then he goes on to say those most beautiful, heartrending words, "We have a building from God, a house not made with hands." We all know that houses made with hands need hands to maintain them. Houses made with hands finally succumb to the hand of time. But do not lose heart; we look at what cannot be seen.

When you hurry past the spooky little cottage on the cemetery lane, winding up out of New Bethlehem, the thing that cannot be seen is that fact that it was my favorite place on earth as a child. What cannot be seen is the five grandchildren who waited all year to spend their summers here. What cannot be heard is the rollicking old Methodist hymns that my grandma sang as she put the laundry on the line, or the sound of grandpa at his woodshop in the basement, making bows and arrows for his grandsons. (He really did make his own arrows!) What cannot be smelled is the freshly cut wood, or the ripe tomatoes in the garden, or the fish sticks in the oven. What cannot be felt is the love that was once lavished in this now-desolate place. Or at least, you can't feel it *here*, in this house made with hands. You can still find the goodness and the beauty of this place, but you'll have to go to the other houses where they've taken up residence. The spirit of this place is still very much alive, despite its desolate look; that spirit has gone to live in the homes of the people who were shaped here. Now the tomatoes grow in South Fayette; but they still grow. Now, for what it's worth, the bow hunting is done in Washington State, where my older brother lives. (Fortunately, the love of TV preachers never caught on with any of us, so they ended up staying put...) The strength and the joy of this desolate place live on forever in the five little people who spent their summers here. The happiness and affection that once hovered over this place now lingers in other places, but you can still find it if you know where to look. It migrated, but lives on, for the things that we see with the eyes are temporary, but the things that cannot be seen are eternal, a house not made with hands.

What places still live on in you, years after their houses and gardens have disappeared? Where did you learn to be a person of courage, hard work, enterprise, thrift? Where did you become a person who loved books, or learning, or language, or numbers? What unseen, inner home has been your constant refuge, long after all the places in your life have changed, or shifted, or been bulldozed to make room for the Interstate? You, too, have a house not made with hands, and it has been your dwelling place down through the years. You, too, have a constant inner retreat, your very own place of safety and rest. More importantly, how have you gone out into your world and constructed havens of security and peace—houses not made with hands—where others

find acceptance and love? “What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Amid all the changes of our life and world, we must never abandon our unseen home, our inner home, our house not made with hands.

In his 1940 novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, Thomas Wolfe's main character has that sad realization that most of us end up having at some time or another. He admits to himself: “You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and fame, back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory.” It just might be true that we adults go through life longing for homes that we can never return to. Some of those old homes are now occupied by strangers. Some have been torn down. Some are still there, but no longer home. But it's also true that, if our homes did their jobs, then we never really left them because they instilled in our spirits a sense of safety and well-being that we've taken out into the world's other places. And from those raw materials, of acceptance and love, we've made new homes. Home lives on in us, then, making us healthy, balanced people, in houses not made with hands.

Houses made *with* hands—on the other hand—will take everything we can give them and never be satisfied. I believe that if we go through life feeling homesick for something we don't quite know, then it's probably because we're expending most of our energies on the houses made with hands—usually paying off their mortgages. Of course, I'm not necessarily referring to the literal houses in our lives, though those are part of what I mean. I'm talking about the tangible evidences of our success: titles, jobs, incomes, cars, a beautiful, intelligent spouse and above average children. Society will happily tell you what to aim for in life, what to dream about. Society will assign you a nice set of goals to live for, and most of us will obediently throw our life's best years and energies into paying them off. Then, sometime after life grows quieter, as we're nearing old age, we look around and say to ourselves, “You know, this is really more than I need. I'm not sure that I ever wanted this in the first place. Dear, what do you say we downsize and start volunteering at the soup kitchen?” In other words, there comes a day when life teaches us anew what really matters, and after feverish decades of chasing after other things, we finally go home to it in the end.

The problem is that we allow society to snap us into its one-size-fits-all mold, and we never think twice. I once heard about a pastor who reused the exact same service for every funeral he performed. He had a template document on his computer, and the only thing he ever changed from one funeral to the next was the name of the deceased. And if the pronouns needed to be switched out between the masculine and the feminine, he would do that, too. But he was a computer-literate kind of fellow, and so he knew how to use a certain “find and replace” feature on his computer; it's a program that can take one word out of a document and replace it with another. One day, he had to change the name in his funeral service from “Mary” to “Edna.” So he used his computer's snazzy find-and-replace feature, which automatically took out Mary and replaced it with Edna throughout the document. The funeral service went as planned until they got to the Apostles' Creed, and the congregation stood to read, the words, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin, Edna.” Each life has its own story and deserves its own document. Oh, the danger of treating people like interchangeable, cookie-cutter things! We are complicated individuals with

back-stories, and histories. Our lives are peopled by whole casts of unseen characters, living and dead. We all have houses not made with hands, and all of them different, and it is out of them that we must live. It is for them that we must live.

My wife and daughters were perfect troopers when I took them up to New Bethlehem to help clean out my grandmother's house—after my uncle had laid waste to the place for eleven years. They understood that it was somehow important to me. But in all the strangeness of that task, I was honestly never saddened to see how a place I once loved had fallen into ruin. Because the deep joy of that place goes with me, casting its radiance over the many other places where life takes me. That joy is my abiding home. Houses made with hands crumble, and you can't go home to them in the end, for they were never truly ours. They're visible and temporary. But the truest and best selves that we become in places where we're loved, those selves live on in us, houses not made with hands. And if we tend to those houses, they will shelter us all our life long. The things that most truly matter never pass, and whether we tend to them or not, most of us will end up returning to them someday: their values, their virtues, and their joys. Tend to your inner home, your best, most decent, most generous, most loving refuge. It's the home that will never leave you, never fall apart, never grow old. "Do not lose heart. We do not look at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. We have a building from God, a house not made with hands." Amen.