

“Making Our Home” / John 14:23-29 / 5 May 2013

“We will come to them and make our home with them.” What could it mean that God would come to you and make God’s home with you?

I knew a woman back in Africa who bought a pet monkey. She was a schoolteacher, and it was Christmas break. She was home alone, day in day out, in a remote African village with nothing to do. She was lonely and bored, so she bought a monkey to take home and keep her company in the tiny, three-room house that Peace Corps had rented for her. She immediately she sent out invitations to all the other Americans living in the region: “Hey, it’s a monkey party at my place. Come and meet my monkey.” So we came, and we met her monkey. It was cute; I’ll give it that much. It was about the size of a Kleenex box, with the tiniest little hands, the smallest of humanlike faces. And when that monkey looked you in the eye, it seemed to stare right into the very depths of your heart. It would cock its little human-looking head to one side and lean forward a little bit, and just peer at you with those big, sad, soulful eyes. The monkey looked almost like some kind of a sage, like Rafiki the Wise Baboon or some holy man living alone on the top of a mountain; you would half expect the little thing to speak to you in proverbs, to hand out advice for living. And yet...the monkey smelled. And it didn’t speak in proverbs and parables; it spoke in screams and hoots at all hours of the day and night. What’s more, the monkey, whose name I can’t recall, was a thief. It would reach into your pockets and try to take your keys. It would reach onto your plate and steal your food. Oh, but how our hostess loved her monkey...for about one week.

Who knew that a steady diet of nothing but bananas would make a monkey sick? Who knew that Christmas break would draw to a close so soon, that the American lady would have to go back to her job teaching in an African school, leaving her ill fated primate to spend the days at home alone? Who knew what a sick, lonely, malnourished monkey—with nothing to do, and no one to play with—might do to a three-room house? I, for one, never knew that a monkey would pull your books off the shelf and tear the pages out one by one, and tear curtains, and knock over shelves.

Who knew that a monkey could be so skilled at graffiti? Except that, in the absence of spray paint, it had to improvise. Ah, and it had looked like such a wise little creature, staring into the depths of your soul! The ironic thing was that the American lady had bought the monkey so that she’d have a friend, but the monkey wasn’t her friend; it was her ball-and-chain. It was the furry little imp that devastated her home almost daily. It was the smelly little animal that drove all her human friends away. And she ended up even lonelier than before. After the “meet my monkey party,” nobody—neither African nor American—ever willingly set foot inside her house again. And who knew how hard it would be to unload a pet monkey? She tried setting it loose, but it wouldn’t go away. She tried giving it away, but nobody would take it. Last I knew, she had it in a cage in her back yard, as dejected as any wild animal that’s been yanked from its rightful place in nature, semi-domesticated, then cast off and caged up for want of a better thing to do with it. Too wild for the house and too tame for the jungle, it had no place to belong; it had no home, its identity caught between two worlds: the house and the jungle.

Where is your home? Where do you belong? Jesus says to his worried disciples, “Anyone who loves me will keep my word. And we will come to them and make our home with them.” Home is a place of safety, acceptance, familiarity, a place to be fully loved, fully known. Jesus promises to make his home with those fear-filled first disciples because they...and you...and I have so much in common with that monkey. We’re forever trying to make our homes in places and under circumstances where we don’t really belong. Caught between two worlds, feeling caged, trapped, separated from something essential to our own well-being, and never fully at home. But we come home to ourselves when God comes to us, and makes a home in us.

If by “home” we mean our truest self, the genuine person that God intends us to be, without pretense and without falsehood, comfortable in our own skins, then we are “un-at-home”—we are exiles—when we try to live out of that other self that we’ve accumulated down through the years:

proud, affected, guarded, always maintaining appearances, always trying to live up to some ideal that—somewhere along the line—we decided was our lot. We try to live out of these second selves, these acquired second natures, and they're not really who we are. It's these second selves, with all their demands and expectations, that end up destroying our sense of self-worth and damaging our relationships. These second selves believe that success equals possessions, reputations, financial security, power. These second selves erode our humility, our simplicity, our ability to be content.

A wealthy man wanted to teach his son compassion; he wanted to show the boy that some people lived in abject poverty. And so, he sent the child to spend a few days on the farm of a poor sharecropper and his family. When the boy came home, his father asked him, "How was the visit?" The boy said, "I loved it!" "Well, tell me what you learned." The child answered, "We have one dog, but they have four. We have to pay people to watch our kids, but their kids get to spend the day with their grandma. We have to buy our food, but they've got everything they need right there. We always have to keep everything under lock and key; they never worry about being robbed. Dad, I never knew how bad we had it!"

Most of us, when asked who we are, point to our achievements, and our skills, our educations, the things we've acquired, our status. But is that most truly who we are? The point of this Internet story is that there are things that don't matter really all that much in life, and ironically, those are precisely the things that we spend most of our energies, time, and resources chasing after. And when we do that, our life becomes lopsided. We end up living out of the wrong side of ourselves, like that poor monkey trying to live in two worlds, and we end up living more out of the accoutrements of life than life itself. And our deepest self, our truest home where we could be most content, is buried so deep beneath all the accumulated notions of what we think we're "supposed to be." If people seem especially crazy these days, maybe it's because they've allowed the TV to tell them who they're supposed to be, what they're supposed to look like, how they're supposed to live. If people are crazy, maybe it's because they think that life requires pretenses and shows of strength; maybe they're crazy because they honestly believe that all the accumulation and debris of living is what life is about, and they live from that place rather than from their deepest selves. They have no inner home where they can take refuge and simply...be.

Last week, on my day off, I put my kayak into Chartiers Creek and let the current carry me from the old Mayview Hospital half the way into Bridgeville. It's surprisingly wild down there on the water. There were great blue herons in the sycamores above the stream, beating their wings loudly and slowly. Little fish darted beneath my boat. The air had an oniony smell: wild leeks (or "ramps"), growing in the woods. I stopped to gather a few. Small ducks splashed and scurried when they saw me coming. The sunlight, the soft breeze, the fresh smell of the rippling water. It took me back to another time when my brothers and I used to fish and swim in creeks like that one. Those childhood places are still exactly where I left them, and not far from here, though the streams of life have borne me far, far from the carefree child I was. And yet, the smell of the water on a sunny day made me feel young in a way that I only ever feel in the spring, by a brook. I felt as if all the world was well, as if I could float all the way down to the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico. Of course, when I had to turn around and paddle back toward my car—against that seemingly gentle current—the feeling of youthful well-being faded right quickly. But aren't there times, aren't there places, just every now and again, when our right minds come and take possession of us? Don't we live out of our truest selves every once in a while, our most hope-filled, unafraid selves with nothing to prove and no one to impress? Doesn't Christ come to us and make a home in us, and make us at home in ourselves? That essential self, with God's fingerprints still on it, is our natural home, but it gets buried under all the accumulated detritus of living, all the bright and shiny things that looked so important at the time, but which amount to so little. These deepest selves, buried far down in each of us, are the source of all wisdom, and strength, and healing. And we can draw upon these inner resources to give us life despite the daily doses of death that we endure. Or we can live out of those composite selves that we've patched

together over the years, and end up like that monkey, caught between two worlds, at home in neither.

Our best dreams, our most genuine prayers, our highest impulses for the good; they all come from this place inside of us, where God comes to us and makes a home. Every once in a while, each of us has found ourselves living, even unexpectedly, out of that better side of ourselves when we've been wiser, or stronger, or calmer, or braver than we are. And in these moments, God has come to us and made a home in us, calling us back to our truest, deepest selves, freeing us from the cages of our own making, and restoring us to the "fullness of life" that's meant to be. Our most urgent need is to dwell more and more from *that* self than from the composite selves, the second selves, that we've acquired down through the years. Life batters us, but those original selves are still deep down there, waiting to be rediscovered. And Christ comes not to give us a set of rules to live by, but to call us home to ourselves.

Linguists did a study and found that the most beautiful words in the English language were, get this, "Mother, love, home, and Ohio." (I'm sure it's in reference to the river, not the state.) Do we live like semi-domesticated monkeys, too wild for the house and too tame for the jungle, un-at-home wherever we go? You'll know that you're living out of your wrong self if you find that your ego is forever getting bruised. Buried down deep below all the things of living, there's an original self. But how to get back there to that good place? *The Wizard of Oz* struggles with that same question: How do you get home to the place you never truly left, the place that's still inside of you? How do you find the courage you had all along, the brains, the heart? In that old movie—as in life—there is no easy answer. But our yearnings—our longings—are a good place to start. There's no easy answer, but Jesus also says, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to