

A PLACE IN GOD'S FAMILY

May 22, 2011

So, you know, the story is that the sermon really is for the seven of you Confirmands today. The others in the room can listen if they want to, but it's for you.

You may have heard in the announcements just a minute ago that we had a rummage sale here yesterday. Everybody in this neighborhood had rummage sales. It was like the Mall of America of Rummage Sales in Astor Park yesterday, and we had one here, and over seven hundred dollars has come from our rummage sale. But do you remember what the money will be used for? Does anybody remember what we said the money will be for? Who remembers? Alexis. Exactly! St. John's Homeless Shelter just north of our church; a shelter for people who are homeless. Have any of you ever been that way? Have any of you ever not had a home? Well, the folks at St. John's...the people who come to St. John's are people who don't have a home...a house...a place to go...a place to belong.

And, you know, for me and maybe for you, too – not belonging is one of the things that I'm most afraid of. I'm afraid of not having a place to be...of not having a house where I can go to...or of not having a family around me...or of not having friends. I can't imagine living life without friends. But, you know, sometimes people get to feeling very alone, and maybe you've seen some folks at school or some people you know who feel that way because other people bully them or make fun of them. When that happens...when we feel like we don't have any friends and nobody likes us...we can feel really lonely. And so, because we don't want to feel that way...because we want to belong...we have to pay attention to what kind of clothes we wear because I know if you wear the wrong clothes, you just don't fit in. Isn't that right? And you've got to watch what you say because if you say the wrong thing as well, then maybe you don't fit in. And you've got to be careful about what you do because if you do the wrong things, then you don't fit in. It's really scary to think about not belonging...that nobody likes us...that there's no place for us to be where we're at home, where we're welcome.

This morning, the story that Mrs. Shier just read from the gospel of John is a story of Jesus teaching His disciples, and Jesus has just told His disciples something that made them very afraid. He told them that He was going to die. He told them that He was going to go away, and they were, I think, feeling like they weren't going to have any place to be anymore...that they didn't belong. So, Jesus said to them: ***Don't be so upset! Trust God...and trust me, too!*** And then Jesus said:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Now those words that Jesus said and that John wrote down in his 14th chapter...those words are words that we most often read in the church when somebody dies because those words are a wonderful promise about the people we love who have died...that there's a place for them in God's house...there's a place in heaven for them. And that promise says that, in that place in God's house, each one of us is going to have a very nice room.

But I think this story means something else, too. I think what Jesus is saying to His disciples – and that means to you seven and to all of us – is that the place we have with God isn't really in a building or a house that we're going to find someday, but it's a place in God's household or in God's family. We've got a place in God's family, and that place is right there for us today. We have a place in God's family. That means that you have a place in God's family – Avia, and Lina, and Alexis and Sam, and Anna, and Jacob, and Maddie – you all have a place in God's family. And what you're doing here today is saying just that...that you've got a place in God's family and that you want to have a place in that family; not only today, but every day. You're always welcome, Jesus tells us, in God's family.

But, that means that, if you've got a place and you're welcome there, then you have to contribute to the family. This may be the bad news part of this story, because this place that God has made for you in God's family is not like a hotel with staff. You have to do your part. Now I suspect that you all have parts to do at home where you live now, don't you? Do you have things to do that you have to do? Do you have chores? And if you don't do your chores, it's not pretty, is it?

What would your parents say if you watched TV, or played video games, or spent all your time on the computer every day? What would they say? **Get up!** All right! And what would your parents say if you only went home four or five times a year? What would they say? **Come more often! I've missed you! Where have you been?** Jesus' promise is that you have a place in God's family today. Your promise today is that you're going to be an active part of that family.

So, **Maddie**, you have a place in God's family. You are a responsible, thoughtful person who is concerned about others. Maddie, you're a leader, and I know that others depend on you. But I also hope that you will let the serendipity of God's Spirit fill your heart so that there's a good deal of fun in the midst of all that responsibility as you trust God every day!

Samuel, you have a place in God's family. Sam, you have taken this faith journey very seriously. You're not one to just take things in lightly. You like to ponder them, and think them over, and ask questions about them. You've looked at the aspects of what it's going to mean to be a part of this faith community. You've thought about it, you've wondered about it, and your gift to this whole congregation is just that. When you're here among us, you remind us that we are to think about what we're doing here, what our journey means to us, and how we can use it to further God's Word in the world.

Jacob, you have a place in God's family. You are just kind of a gentle, easygoing guy who doesn't let a lot of things bother you...and your smile comes quickly, but the frown not so much. You know how to keep things in perspective, Jacob. So, I hope that your gift to this congregation and to God's world will be to share God's love and to let it show in everything that you say and that you do.

Alexis, you have a place in God's family. You know, Alexis, you're the person who, when you walk into the room, all we hear are squeals: **Alexis is here! Alexis is here!** You are a quiet leader in spite of all the noise around you and those greetings. You work hard. It's important to you to do things fully and to, in some ways, do things perfectly. You work hard. You strive hard. You're studious and, when it comes to your faith, you also question. It's not so easy for you to just say: *I can believe in that.* You also ask questions and hard questions, and that's your gift to us. Your presence among us is to remind us to ask the hard questions, to be open to

doubting, to also though, be that presence that allows others to say/: *We're so glad you're here, and we're so glad we're here because you bring a very special light when you come into a room.*

Avia, you have a place in God's family. Now, Avia, I know, and we all know, that you absolutely love your friends, and that you really enjoy life. I'm not sure I know many people who enjoy life more than you do. And I also know, Avia, that, for you, life's a drama and it's a constant conversation. That spirit that you offer – that spirit of adventure...of being spontaneous...of enjoying each moment – is an incredible gift for us. And I hope that, for you in this adventure of life, you'll remember along the way to think, and to pray, and to listen to God and to others.

Carolina, you have a place in God's family. Lina, you are our enthusiastic one. You're quick with that big welcoming smile. You're the one who is willing to raise your hand and take a risk with an answer. You're willing to put yourself forward. You're the one who is open, and inviting, and hospitable to everyone else in the classroom...or whoever happens to wander in and out. It really doesn't matter. You bring a life and vitality, and so that is your gift to this congregation. You remind us that it is important for us to open our arms wide to welcome, to be vital, to be hospitable, to celebrate God's Word in our midst, to be filled with joy, and that is your gift to us.

Anna, you have a place in God's family. You have one of those personalities that is inviting and engaging. You draw other people in. You make us a part of your world. You have also, besides that kind of charismatic appeal, a great ability to understand things and then to talk about them...to be both thoughtful and enthusiastic. And that's really a great description of the way to live a Christian life: to be thoughtful and enthusiastic...to always know that there's something wonderful happening around us, no matter what might seem tough. So, Anna, my hope for you is, as you offer the gift of yourself to this congregation and to God's world, that you will follow wherever God leads you and that your life will make a big difference in this world.

Each one of you has very special gifts to offer. You are indeed unique individuals; we have discovered that in our last years and months together. You have much to offer. And so I encourage you, as you stand here today to take your vows before this congregation, to become members of this congregation...to remember those gifts...to remember that you – each one of you – is extremely important to the life of this church...that it makes a difference if you're not here...that it diminishes us if we don't see your face and feel your presence.

So, we invite you to participate...to get involved...to be active...to join in Senior High Table Talk...to be a part of YCA...to come to church regularly...to offer all of those things that you have to offer because not only are the folks here present to teach you, but you very much indeed are present to remind and teach each one of them. And so this day, we do welcome you into our midst. This day we truly celebrate that you are a part of God's household, and that you will dwell with us forever. Amen.

Margaret W. Feyen and Charles E. Mize
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