

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**July 14, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings : Ruth 1 :15-18**  
**Matthew 7 :24-28**

**Sermon : Our Spiritual Geography - Home**

How many of you have read the book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder « Little House on the Prairie? » How many of you watched the TV series? Am I dating myself, or do people still watch the reruns? I read and watched, and loved them both.

But if there was one problem with the TV series, I would have to say, that it left you with the impression that Laura Ingalls Wilder lived for a very long time in that one little house in that prairie community.

If you've read the whole book series – there were nine in all – there was not just one little house. There was the little house in the big woods, the little house on plum creek, the little house by the silver lake, the sod house, the log cabin, there was a house in town. You might even say there was a “home” of sorts in the covered wagon, which they lived in as it took them from place to place. In all, Laura Ingalls lived in more than a dozen houses before she was eighteen and then she married Almanzo Wilder – and set out on new adventures - more houses and homesteads, more new neighbours and landscapes.

After you've read a few books, your whole definition of what makes a house a home might change. It is not having the same curtains or the same furniture or a familiar view out the window. For Laura every house became a home when Ma unwrapped her china figurine and found a safe place for it. When they figured out where everyone would make their bed. When Pa pulled out his fiddle and the family fell asleep to the sound of his music.

It didn't matter if they were in a camp or a cabin, a sod house or a frame house (with real glass in the windows!) What made that place home was the relationship of her family to work and rest, human community and nature.

Home was not a building, but a state of mind.

Until recently, most people always lived where their ancestors lived. That is a sweeping generalization, of course, AT TIMES war and famine and the call of God have often led humanity to move, from one place to another, in search of a new home. But, at least up until the last few centuries, the majority of people were normally born and raised, they procreated and died on the land of their ancestors.

Since the last century, however, people are more likely to move a significant distance from their roots than they are to stay at home. Now more people are out of place, at least geographically speaking: immigrants, refugees, people fleeing climate change and economic hardship, younger people seeking employment or adventure, older people retiring to their place in the sun.

I am an avid watcher of those home renovation real estate shows on TV. It surprises me the number of people who walk up to or into a house, and say “it doesn’t speak to me”. They don’t like the paint colour or the kitchen linoleum. They wanted yet another bathroom or bedroom. They just can’t see themselves living in a brick house.

But then I am reminded, that these people are moving jobs, leaving family behind, having children, learning a new roadmap for their lives. The place they will call “home” has suddenly become much more important, it defines the message they send to the world – we are here. This is who we are. Or This is who we want to be.

Social change in our home life has been rapid. The traditional extended family - became nuclear family - became more single-parent families - suddenly became more solo households than any other kind of household.

The 2016 Census revealed that for the first time in recorded Canadian history, one-person households were the most common household type, overtaking households comprising couples or couples with children. So for many a house is no longer about accommodating relationships, but mainly about security and comfort and convenience. It offers space for nourishment, rest, pampered pets, you can even “go to work” without ever leaving the physical space of your home.

The concept of home plays a significant role in many religions. In ancient faiths, the gods made their homes in trees and oceans, in stars and storms. In other traditions, we are reminded of the longing for a Jewish Homeland, of households turning to Mecca in Islam, of the individual shrines found in Hindu and Shinto homes, and how even in Buddhism, where all is impermanent, enlightenment itself provides a kind of spiritual home for the believer.

In Christianity, the first churches were household churches. Parents taught the next generation the stories of Jesus as they broke bread together with a shared cup. Households were baptized together, by apostles like Paul: men, women and children, landowners and slaves – whoever lived together, believed together, prayed together. Unlike the Roman model of household life, Jesus’ teaching included women and children, the disabled, widows and orphans. You didn’t need to be related – early Christians often took other Christians into their homes because of the family created by faith. Wherever they found God the first Christians were said to be at home, for God was their home. Meanwhile, the Romans worried that the followers of Christ were threatening the whole social order, because it started in the home.

In the Hebrew scripture story, Ruth, with her commitment and compassion, put aside her own security to ensure Naomi had a home where she was loved.

In the parable of the two houses, Jesus told the story of two householders, one who built his house on sand, the other who built his house upon a rock. I think you know what happened after that... the rains came down and the floods came up / and the house on the sand fell splat!

Jesus’ message touched the hearts of all who heard it – they could relate to it because they were either living in homes or longing for a home. The parable just made sense –

home, like faith, was deeply personal for each and every listener, no matter how big or small their actual homes were. All wanted some protection from the storms of life.

Jesus asked his listeners – so who will you trust your true home to? Your favourite things? Your loved ones? Your life? Where and how canl you dwell in peace forever?

It might sound like a home insurance ad to us today, but Jesus was speaking about their spiritual home, not the physical one. Their spiritual home was in God's kingdom – Jesus wasn't speaking about the afterlife, but the kingdom of God being a kind of heaven on earth. When the whole earth learns to live in God's way, Jesus taught, we will all live in security and compassion.

Truly putting your faith in God and trusting all that you are to that hope is like building your house on a rock, said Jesus, because that heaven on earth is where God dwells. God dwells in your heart, not in a temple or a church or any building – live in love and you will find that God is very much at home in you. It reflects the fullness of life that comes to us in life and death and life after death.

Unfortunately, sometimes our homes are not safe spaces.

The intimacy and vulnerability that are the foundation of God's love, and the basis of a home - those vulnerabilities and tender emotions can become an easy pathway to emotional, physical, or economic abuse. Sometimes even our faith God, or someone's interpretation of God, becomes a tool in justifying the abuse that happens at home.

We often scoff at notions like the Christian temperance movements that restricted the sale of alcohol, in an age where alcohol and other substances seem to be available almost everywhere, any time. One of my heroes, however, is Nellie McClung, who championed the temperance movement as a way of ensuring that a family's household income did not end up spent on alcohol or other vices, when it was needed for feeding and sheltering the family at home. As Christians, we demonstrate love through our homes. That love should be visible in how resources are shared, who is welcomed, and who is invited into decision making around the table.

The world first enters into our hearts at home, says Diana Butler Bass. If one learns kindness at home, it is easier to practice kindness in the world and it becomes the script for the rest of our lives. She follows that thought with a poem, connecting home to our ultimate dwelling in God:

*The floor in this house is wood... wide old boards.  
When I walk I am walking on the wood and in the woods  
I am walking on the life of these trees.  
They have been cut and planed, offered up for this sheltering.  
My foot falls.  
The ground rises to meet it.  
A holy ordinary moment is repeating itself.  
All the time I am meeting  
and being met  
like this...*

*Your whole creation is the ground,  
Help me to remember  
that in this mutuality  
we can become home  
for each other.  
You are asking us  
slowly to become  
your holy site.*

Thanks be to God, for home and shelter and love everlasting, Amen