

“Dwellings: Victory” Hebrews 9.11-14, 24-28

This month we are looking at the theme of “Dwellings,” exploring all the places God lives. Last week we focused on the verse from Revelation that, in Eugene Peterson’s words, tells us that “God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!” (Rev. 21.3)

Today’s theme is “Victory,” and the focus is more on how *we* dwell in the victory that Jesus gives us. I’ve shared with you often that when I sit down to write my sermons, I’m frequently surprised by the message the Holy Spirit sends me, because often it isn’t anything like what I thought I was going to write. This was definitely one of those weeks when I saw the text and the theme from a different perspective after I’d spent some time with it.

First, the title of “Victory:” I’ve never really been a very competitive person. My brother, Chris, would always get so intense whenever we played board games when we were growing up, and our son, Thomas, kept track of grade point averages to the 100th percentage point when he was a senior in high school. I enjoy watching the Indians win, but personally, I’ll let someone else struggle to be first in most anything. I mean, I try not to be a slacker in anything I do, but being in first place, or keeping track of competitors and standings just doesn’t usually inspire me to work (or play) harder.

So I wasn’t sure if the victory theme was going to work for a sermon or not. Then when I read today’s text, I *really* wasn’t sure; how do dwellings and victory relate to Christ as the high priest, blood offering and sacrifice? As I was mulling over all these questions, I turned to the preaching notes from Discipleship Ministries, as I often do, to get me started. The author this month is Rev. Dr. Heather Heinzman Lear, Director of Evangelism at Discipleship Ministries in Nashville. She related a story about a worship service she attended as a leader on a pilgrimage to Korea. The prayer service she described started very early in the morning with the singing of two or three hymns. This particular morning one of the hymns chosen was “Victory in Jesus,” about which she writes: “The fervor with which the 600 people gathered at 5:00 a.m. sang Eugene M. Bartlett, Sr.’s most famous song was remarkable. The passion and deep belief in the words they were singing was quite evident.”¹

So of course I had to go look up the hymn and read the words for myself. It was, obviously, already familiar to me, but, I’ll admit, not one of my favorites. Not only am I not competitive, I also have never really appreciated “blood language” in describing Jesus’ saving action. But in reading the words of the hymn, and intentionally spending time with them, I realized the hymn is about Christ’s victory and about “winning” in the sense of bringing others into the relationship with Christ that this hymn so joyfully celebrates. It isn’t competition in the sense we usually think of it, and the blood language is simply a way to put a name to the salvation we find and claim in Christ.

In most of the United Methodist churches of which I’ve been a part, we haven’t often talked about witnessing, or giving testimony. But the hymn “Victory in Jesus” is a great example

¹ (Lear 2018)

of witnessing to the power of Jesus Christ. It's really a simple story: Jesus came to save us—me—from sin's oppressive power. Jesus came to heal us—me—of whatever makes us less than healthy and whole. Jesus came with a promise of eternal life in a place with no tears and sadness; nothing but joy and love and time to praise God forever.

Rev. Lear asked the questions, in her sermon notes, if our congregation has a practice of faith sharing, and then, wondered if most of the congregation could articulate their faith story and the difference Jesus has made in their lives. She also asked, more deliberately, if the congregation knows their *pastor's* faith story? Her questions really made me stop and think about what "victory in Jesus" means in *my* life, and for all our lives, *and* about how we share that with others.

I realized that I don't often work my own faith story into conversation—even with church folks or in settings where it might be appropriate to the discussion. I'm not sure I've even ever really shared it in a sermon. I talk about my call to ordained ministry fairly often, but I really don't share the faith foundation that was what enabled and allowed me to hear the call of God on my life.

Let me start by saying that witnessing or sharing your testimony isn't some really difficult thing or something you have to be trained to do, and it certainly is not a competition! Sharing your testimony may be emotional, because it's so personal, but your witness is simply telling what God has done in your life—how having a relationship with Jesus has changed you and made your life better. Some people can pinpoint one moment or one defining mountaintop event that was life changing; my experience has been different.

My "moment of grace" was not some big dramatic occasion, and for a long time I thought maybe I wasn't as "Christian" as my friends who had knelt at the altar, or found themselves speechless and sobbing after a particularly stirring revival. I grew up in a Christian home, and so prayer, scripture, and "God talk" was always a part of my life. I always knew that Jesus loved me, no matter what, and that when I messed up, I could ask for, and receive, forgiveness. I knew, in most situations, what Jesus would do. As I matured in years, my faith also matured, and the times spent at church-related events were highlights of my life. I just simply sensed—had it ingrained in my very being—that God was with me always, and that God had a plan for my life.

I admit it took me a few years to accept and respond to what it was God ultimately wanted me to do, but I never doubted God's love for me, and what a difference that makes. I am held accountable for my sins and for the times I've treated others less than lovingly—but in the end I know that *nothing* can take away God's love:

Romans 8:38-39

I'm convinced that **nothing can separate** us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

That's what Jesus did, and continues to do, for me.

I love the way Hebrews Chapter 9 concludes: “[Christ] will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9.28b). I am eagerly waiting for Jesus to come again, and why wouldn’t I want to share that eagerness? Why wouldn’t I want to share what a difference knowing God’s love and Jesus’ grace makes, and help others come to experience that difference for themselves?

I think sometimes we take our faith for granted, and even when we share that love and offer grace to others, we don’t really acknowledge that we’re doing what we do because we are participating in Christ’s victory.

I remember years ago one of my friends made a trip to a Russian orphanage. She had packed an extra suitcase—crammed full of donated coats and sweaters. As she handed them out to the families there, many were reluctant to accept the gifts. Mary reported that one woman asked her, “Why would you give us, people you don’t even know, warm clothing, for free?” Those folks had no concept of Christian love, which of course was why that extra suitcase had been packed and lugged from airport to airport, and then to the orphanage.

There are people right here in Ashland County who don’t understand why we would go out of our way to help them. It’s up to us to tell our story, to invite them into the wonderful relationship with Jesus Christ that brings us so much joy, and peace, and which inspires us to help others.

As Rev. Dr. Lear writes in the conclusion of this week’s sermon notes, “In a place of deep divisions and brokenness in our country, what difference does and could Jesus make? Where does the good news speak into the places that seem hopeless and lost? Do we live as if the weight and power of sin has already been taken away and that Jesus’ sacrifice and love is available and intended for all people?”²

I’m going to leave those powerful questions just sit with you this week, and ask you to continue to pray about new ways to share *your* story, so that others might be drawn to that great love of God in Jesus Christ, from which we can never be separated: victory in Jesus! Amen.

Works Cited

Lear, Heather Heinzman. "Season after Pentecost 2018." *Discipleship Ministries*. 11 4, 2018. https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worsip/Nove18_Dwellings-Worship-Series.pdf (accessed 10 15, 2018).

² (Lear 2018)