

## **Where is Our Home?**

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered February 24, 2019  
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Last week here at this congregation, many of you heard from Lee Murdock, Executive Director of the Homeless Network of Yakima County. I'm glad she was here and spoke to us all – I have great respect for Lee and the many others who are part of the network here in the valley. It is common for people who don't know better to complain that nobody does anything about “the homeless problem” in this area; what they should see is the tremendous amount of hard work done by many providers, agencies, and individuals to help those in need. It is impressive and important work.

Many of you know that the Homeless Network of Yakima County was originally founded about a dozen years ago, with the mission of eliminating homelessness in Yakima County in ten years. That is a good and noble mission, even if it is a bit over-ambitious. And there is little doubt in my mind that the network has made profound and important strides in alleviating the problem of homelessness here in the valley, and has done this through and in spite of the sometimes toxic effects of politics and money and how they are often used to wield power and prestige more than to actually help people. That tendency has been apparent, at times, both in the formal “Network” and the informal network of governments and providers that get involved in homelessness and housing issues. But as I said, in spite of this tendency, I very strongly believe that much good humanitarian work has been done – and continues to be done – to alleviate the problems of homelessness and the shortage of affordable housing in this community.

I'm not going to present to you numbers or graphs to back up this claim, even though I'm sure a good case can be made to back it up based on various statistics collected according to national and statewide parameters developed by agencies such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD.) Instead, I base my opinion on the work our local agencies and Network has done on personal observations of human interaction. Whether I'm watching a caseworker from Yakima Neighborhood Health developing a relationship with a client, or helping serve a meal or drive a shuttle for one of our temporary shelters for homeless people, or greeting any of the numerous people who often hang out on the grounds of this church and its neighborhood, one of the things I most often observe is the extent to which many of the people we call "homeless" want – and need – to simply engage in human interaction; they need to be treated like human beings. This I know: even if all these agencies and all these dollars never permanently housed a single person or got one soul off the street, the opportunity they offer for people to be treated and seen as real, whole, and worthy human beings is priceless.

This may sound like not saying much; and maybe it isn't. But it is necessary to say, if only because our culture has developed a great capacity for treating people like something other than human beings. We often do it with even the best of intentions – even as we try to "help" them. We tend to treat them like numbers or statistics, like problems to be solved, like mechanical robots whose choices should be limited to ensure they make the right one. Even in the ways we refer to them, we tend to erase their humanness – like when we say "the homeless" to talk about people who are living someplace other than a traditional house or apartment. I've

learned in my work with homeless people to try to avoid that kind of language – but I’m always surprised by how reliably it evokes and is invoked by people operating from a place of compassion. “Oh, the homeless – I want to try to help,” or “We all need to help the homeless in this community.” It’s very similar to the way we sometimes refer to people with disabilities as “the disabled,” for example. One thing I’ve come to appreciate knowing people who are or have experienced homelessness is how important it is to see them as real human beings; to relate to them not just as helpers or fixers but as empathetic persons who don’t assume we’re superior just because we have a roof over our heads. Human beings are social creatures who need a sense of visibility and belonging in community every bit as much as we need food and shelter.

(Fear – youth in Berkeley.)

The point of this story is to illustrate how difficult it is for many of us who have never experienced homelessness to be able to meet people who are homeless with empathy and equitable human relating. And it often is those whose job it is to provide services who learn to transcend their fears and difficulties and meet people where they are. For that, I believe that the efforts of our service providers have been very beneficial – including many of you who showed up with your presence here at UUCY when we hosted the extreme winter weather shelters a few years ago.

I didn’t intend today to talk about homelessness as a social issue – rather, I want to explore what it means to have a home (or not) in not just a physical sense but also a spiritual sense. But before I get into that I want to make one more comment about the social and political playing field on which much of our work with people is played. I’ve been involved in

various efforts to combat homelessness now in three or four major cities around the country for the last two or three decades. And the thing is, they all seem very much the same. Indeed, homelessness is not a problem at all unique to Yakima nor to Washington State – by one recent count, the city of Los Angeles alone has in excess of sixty thousand people who are without homes at any point in time. That rivals the entire population of Yakima. It is an endemic problem throughout the United States, and has been for years. So the question I sometimes ask is why are we working so hard to create local solutions to this global problem? Just about every municipality has a core group of dedicated people who work hard every day trying to help people find and keep homes, so that they may have a base from which to develop a healthy and secure life.

The Rev. Dan Bryant, a Disciples of Christ Minister from Eugene, Oregon, spoke here in Yakima a couple years ago when the Yakima Association of Faith Communities invited him to be a part of the “Justice Housing Yakima” kickoff (more on that in a minute.) Rev. Bryant has established or helped establish several affordable housing programs in Eugene, including a couple of tiny house villages. He began his remarks by invoking the popular parable about people in a village who notice babies floating down the river and begin to rescue them, but then one person walks away from the immediate problem to go look upstream to find out who is throwing babies in the river to begin with and why. This parable is useful and often invoked as illustrating the best approach to dealing with homelessness, and helpers are often guided to working closer to the root causes of the problem rather than just helping people already drowning in it, such as by establishing more affordable housing, working to abolish

discriminatory practices in rental housing, and coupling their work getting people into homes with work addressing various personal causes such as alcoholism, mental illness, family violence, etc. This is all well and good, but still I'm left with the question if we've gone upstream far enough in order to really understand what's going on. If we journey upstream we find the stream is very different from a natural one: rather than getting smaller and smaller as we go against the current, we find it gets larger and larger. We find a mighty river, in fact – a river of an economic and cultural system that continually pushes people to act like machines driven only by self-interest, that divides people by forcing them into continual competition and an individualistic identity, that seizes public goods and property and re-brands them as private entities, that further enriches the rich while depleting the resources of the poor and vulnerable and those who don't play by these rules. This river drives up the price of housing in order to fund luxuries for the few, and drowns people in a torrent of blame and shame for not being able to swim in this mighty current no matter what circumstances might hinder them. If we truly want to find the place where the babies are being thrown in the river, this is where we need to go. We need to stop looking at homelessness as merely a local problem – we need national attention. I'm all for practicing the “think globally, act locally” dictum, but I think we're all going to drown at some point if we're unable to stop this massive river that dwarfs our individual efforts.

So this is where I get to the larger picture I want to paint today. I think our culture is hesitant to journey up this river, in part, because it leads to some very perplexing and uncomfortable places – places in which the

very idea of “home” comes into question. What is a “home?” Is it even possible for one to be “homeless?”

Thinking about these questions brought me back to “The Unsettling of America,” Wendell Berry’s seminal book first published some forty years ago addressing the corporate takeover of American farms and farmland and how that affected rural communities. He begins his book with these words:

*“One of the peculiarities of the white race’s presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be. The continent is said to have been discovered by an Italian who was on his way to India. The earliest explorers were looking for gold, which was, after an early streak of luck in Mexico, always somewhere further on. Conquests and foundings were incidental to this search – which did not, and could not, end until the continent was finally laid open in an orgy of goldseeking in the middle of the (nineteenth) century. Once the unknown of geography was mapped, the industrial marketplace became the new frontier, and we continued, with largely the same motives and with increasing haste and anxiety, to displace ourselves – no longer with unity of direction, like a migrant flock, but like the refugees from a broken ant hill. In our own time we have invaded foreign lands and the moon with the high-toned patriotism of the conquistadors, and with the same mixture of fantasy and avarice.”*

Like I said, Mr. Berry was writing about the industrialization of American farming, and how that caused people to become “unsettled” from the land. I appreciate in his opening paragraphs that he specifies that he is talking about the “white race” in America, for it is this race that perpetrates

more than any other the ongoing detachment from the land and the communities that naturally exist on and with it. I believe Mr. Berry was seeing this same river I spoke about, the river that breaks people away from their indigenous nature – disconnected from the land and their communities. In other words, it makes them homeless, since our true homes are the earth and the local communities that evolve with it.

I find it perhaps a bit more than ironic that this “unsettling,” as Mr. Berry calls it – this mad and chaotic scramble all over the continent trying to find a place to call home – has been perpetrated by the same race of people who set up our current infrastructure and legal framework for private ownership of property. I wonder if there hasn’t been for generations in America a deep-seated psychological problem that we’ve never been able to name: namely, that as people who long ago lost our indigenous connection to specific places and communities, we have instituted a system in which we attempt to compensate for that loss, that deep yearning that stems from us missing a key ingredient to our being. Our ancestors, and even many of us in this present day, were and are in this sense “homeless,” in that we don’t have a place on this earth to which we are deeply connected and intimately familiar. Instead, we trade in the issuance of deeds of property – and create, or attempt to create, little fiefdoms – whether they be tiny apartments or cabins or humongous estates – that we are entitled to call our own.

I remember some years ago a friend whose background was not dissimilar to mine, referred to himself as part of the “middle-class homeless,” referring to his family history of moving to different homes, cities, and states many times throughout his life. I have a similar story:

growing up, my family moved five times – all but once to a different state – between the time I was born and when I graduated from high school. And from the time I finished college until now I've had at least twenty different addresses in five different states. Yet today my name is on a deed of property, which gives me the legal right to call it my own and not allow anyone else – even those whose families have been here for generations; even those whose families are indigenous to this area – to set foot on it. Yet I am not considered part of the problem, for I operate within this legal construct. Yet the question haunts me: who is really homeless? Me or the person sleeping in the alley behind my house?

Wendell Berry's book is a lament, in part, on what did constitute a settlement of the white race he referred to in the closest approximation we are able to muster under the circumstances: the family farm. For a few generations, anyway, many of our ancestors did settle on a piece of land – a place, with a community – for a while. But Mr. Berry gave witness to the widespread usurpation of this settlement, in the name of bigger and “better” (i.e. more profitable) agriculture. The power and trend behind this is the same river I spoke of earlier – the river that transforms the value of everything, including land and people, into primarily vehicles for profit-making. So we went from being a semi-settled people on family farms centered around rural communities, to being vagabonds clamoring around ever larger cities staking out claims on which to feel secure, to... what? What are we being transformed into? Is there an end to this story? Or will this river keep flowing indefinitely, until only a very few rich and powerful people claim all the land and buildings on it, while everyone else scrambles



our whole lives to try to find a place on which to settle and feel at peace, if only for a time?

I'm not naïve enough to believe that we can easily go back in time to correct this disconnection our culture has from the land and from each other by reverting to previous social and legal arrangements. But I believe we need to be honest with ourselves and with each other in order to truly understand what we have to do. All human beings have an innate need for a home – not just a building with a door and a key but also a place to know, a place to feel at peace, a place to belong. Indeed, this need is better understood not in terms of buildings or pieces of property at all, but rather as communities of belonging. To whatever extent that any of us don't have this connection and community in our lives, it is not incorrect to say that we're all homeless. Perhaps our culture is homeless.

I don't want those words to be interpreted to in any way imply a lesser sense of need and urgency for those in our midst who do not have proper houses or buildings in which to live. That remains a serious problem that we all need to look at; what I'm saying is we need to try to understand the full extent of the problem by looking honestly at the root causes of it and how those causes relate to many aspects of our own comfort. One of the characteristics of indigenous communities – including, I believe, that of the Yakama people who inhabited this land for thousands of years – is one doesn't have to earn a home. Home is a given. It is the Earth and it's plethora of ecosystems, and it is the people with whom one is born and shares the land.

Many of you know that I've been working for the past few years with the new non-profit [Justice Housing Yakima](#), which is in the process of

building a village of tiny homes on some land we recently acquired near Milroy Park in Yakima. Like I said at the outset, there are many good and important programs underway from many different quarters, and Justice Housing's Cottage Hill Village is one of them. I have put my support with this group and this model precisely because the solution it offers goes further into this territory. It is not only a development of affordable housing in which important social services will be offered – vital as that is. It is also designed, from the start, to be a supportive community of peers who will work together to oversee and govern much of the project. Two of our core principles are that all people need homes, and all people need dignity and respect. At Cottage Hill Village, I believe, these two will go hand in hand.

I also want to hold up in light of our knowledge of this void in our culture, the value of supportive religious communities like this one. We are here because having a home is not enough – a home in this sentence being a physical building. We are here to help meet our own needs for connection – if not to the land directly, at least to many who share our desire for deeper connections. As we often talk about, religious communities themselves are changing in America, and to the extent some of these changes are driven by that same river of exploitation and private desires, I hope we can resist following the trend. Too often the big churches become nothing more than flashy show, entertainment for a bored population. That's an easy road, but ultimately useless. I hope we continue to build a more organic community of people coming together to meet our innate need for connection. I hope we do this not by focusing too much on our physical building or street address in the city, but instead

feeling our connection to this land, this earth, and the people in this community as being the primary reason we're here.

And if you ask me, that's good enough.



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