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Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47

“There’s No Place Like Home”

It is appropriate that our texts today focus on home and sitting around a table. In Psalm 23, perhaps the most beloved text in all of scripture, the Psalmist says the Lord prepares a table in the presence of his enemies, and prays that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In our Gospel text Jesus describes himself both as a shepherd and a gate, a door of sorts, through which the sheep, being all of us, are to be shepherded home. The home and the table are often connected, sometimes symbolizing the same thing, in scripture.

In Acts 2, a text about the earliest Christian church, the emphasis is on fellowship, that Christians are to share all that we have with one another and the poor, and are to break bread with gladness in their homes. This, Luke, the author of Acts, suggests, is how Christians are to live.

Robert Frost famously wrote that home is that place where they have to take you in. This weekend, alumni weekend on campus, is a homecoming of sorts. Many of you are returning to Duke to reconnect with a place that is so meaningful, a place that may feel a lot like home. And for the cost of a pricey Durham hotel room, a few hundred bucks in plane tickets, and a \$40 registration fee, we are glad to take you in. Home. Volumes of the world’s great literature from Homer’s “Odyssey” to Thomas Wolfe’s “Look Homeward Angel,” have been dedicated to the journey home. The Christian story might well be described as a lengthy journey of homecoming. Has there been a better story ever told than that of the Prodigal Son. To dwell in the house of the Lord forever, says the Psalmist.

Today we are celebrating 75 years since construction began on the Chapel. Over those 75 years the Chapel has meant different things to different people. A towering reminder of the University’s heritage and traditions. A place of protest and social reform. A sanctuary of prayer and respite from the burdens of life. How many have driven south on 85 and as they were approaching campus, strained their eyes across the horizon to catch a glimpse of the tower of this Chapel peeking over the North Carolina pines. And so it is also a catch-all symbol of Duke, of place and purpose and connection. But most of all, it remains what it was meant to be, a sacred space of beauty and Christian worship, a towering Church calling us to an even deeper sense of homecoming.

In the first sermon ever preached in this Chapel, Dean Lynn Harold Hough of Drew University recounted the following conversation: “The other day I heard an address by a Christian leader of great eminence. I walked away from the building with a man whose name you would recognize. “It was a notable address, was it not?” I said to my friend. “Yes,” he replied, “it was a great speech.” He was silent a moment. Then he added: “I am over eighty years of age. He told me nothing about what I can hope for when I make my great adventure.” The Chapel is a physical testament to what we can hope for, that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

But home, belonging, where we might be welcome at the table and eat with others with glad and generous hearts is not merely about the sweet by and by, but is very much a longing in the here and now. All of us are looking for home, where we belong, where we can join old friends and family around the table and eat as the disciples did in this story from Acts with glad and generous hearts. How many meals have been shared with old friends already on this alumni weekend.

However, life around the table is rarely so ideal and functional. In fact, two chapters later in Acts, the next time we see the disciples gathered in someone's home, a typical family fight breaks out. Annanias and Sapphira, two Christian converts, sell a parcel of land and instead of contributing to the common purse, they keep some for themselves. An argument erupts around the table and the consequences are not pleasant. How often do deception, conflict, and misunderstanding reign at the table and in the home.

It's the end of another long and hectic day in Raleigh, or Newark, or London, or Durham, or the marketplace on East Campus. A family, for the sake of rhetorical ease, we'll pretend this is a traditional family, gets ready to sit down at the dinner table. The mother has just gotten home from work. The father finished a little early and has just taken the casserole out of the oven. The seven year old helps set the table. The three year old takes his accustomed seat. Hands are held; a hurried grace is said. Just as the food is to be passed out, the three year old, still learning to drink out of a glass, raises his glass, his hand slips, milk spills out all over the table and into the mother's lap. She loses her temper for just a moment and rebukes her little boy. The father leaps up to grab a towel to clean up the mess. The seven year old starts to laugh at her little brother. He sees the carnage he has caused, hears his mother's raised voice, his sister's shrill laugh, and begins to cry. By this time the father has quarantined the spillage. The mother has saved part of the casserole and both parents are trying to temper their older child and calm the younger one. The towel is soaking up the milk, a typical family dinner.

Tom Mullen, appropriately titled his collection of essays on life in the home, "Where Two or Three are Gathered, Someone Spills the Milk." Indeed. And this is not the exception; it's the norm! Bill Ritter put it this way, "I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk."

Figuratively speaking, the milk that gets spilled at the table is the most painful kind, and the wounds that are inflicted at the table cut much deeper than burnt casserole.

Despite what Frost says, home is not always the place that welcomes you back. I remember well a conversation I had with a friend at the beginning of my junior year in college. Over the summer she had worked up the courage to come out of the closet to her parents, hoping that they would find a way to listen to her and love her. Instead, her father replied, "this is no longer your home." All she wanted was to feel whole again. What went wrong?

The phone rings; it's the eldest daughter. The drugs started when she was 13. Her parents did everything they possibly could and now she's back in the rehab center. Dad slams the door in anger. Mother weeps at the kitchen table. What did they do wrong? Another Saturday night, her husband is out late again. She knows he's drinking and this was to be his last chance. Where did she go wrong? Freshman year started off fine, the two roommates who were previously strangers quickly became best friends. But now it's three and a half years later, their lives have taken different paths, graduation is

around the corner so they get together for a farewell meal, and the goodbyes seem empty somehow. How did it come to this? I spill milk, you spill milk, all God's children spill milk.

Sometimes it works the other way around. The table can also be the place where old wounds begin to heal and hope of a better future begins to take shape. In John Irving's novel, *The World According to Garp*, John Irving has this great scene where Garp and his wife Helen have wounded each other deeply. They are sitting there at the table and Garp finally breaks the silence by scribbling a note to her and slides it across the table. It says, "I don't blame you." After a moment, he jots down another note: "I don't blame me either." Then he writes a third note: "Only in this way can we be whole again."

The author Anne Tyler is a graduate of Duke, a 1960 graduate of the women's college to be exact. She has written a bundle of remarkable books, but the one I've been thinking about this past week is the one she called: "Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant." You may know the story. It's a story not so different from a lot of our stories, about a family with a sordid past and all sorts of weird and painful dysfunctions. It's about memories and longing for days gone by, about coming home, and hope, hope that one day things will become the way they should have always been. It narrates the odyssey of the Tull family, who came of age in blue-collar Baltimore during and after World War II. The father walked out when the three children were young. The children fought horribly with each other and with their mother throughout childhood, and those scars, along with the gaping hole of their father's absence, don't disappear when adulthood comes.

In the final scene of the book, Pearl, the mother of the children, has died. Her three children now grown with spouses and children and step-children of their own in tow, return to the old neighborhood for the funeral. To everyone's surprise, the father who hasn't been seen in years also shows up.

After the funeral, the youngest son Ezra, in some sense the glue of the family, invites everyone to dinner at his restaurant, the one called, the Homesick Restaurant. It's not the finest restaurant in town, but it's warm and cozy enough. The father, Beck Tull, joins the party. He is visibly excited to be with his children after all those many years, amazed at what they have accomplished, and giddy over his grandchildren. The rest of the family, with the sting of death and years of pent up resentment towards him bubbling to the surface, does not share his enthusiasm. As they sit at the table he asks his daughter Jenny if her new baby, Becca, is named after him. "Her name is Rebecca," Jenny says coldly, without looking up. Beck Tull gets the hint. The past is still the past. Some doors cannot be re-opened, home doesn't always take you back in, and he slips away, unable to remain with the family he abandoned so long ago.

But Ezra, desperate for what should have been, what should be, hollers for the old man. "Please," he says. "Please, for once I want this family to finish a meal together. Why, every dinner we've ever had, something has gone wrong. Someone has left in a huff, or in tears, everything has fallen apart."

The family fans out into the streets of Baltimore. They are now the ones looking for the father, wanting him to come back to finish their meal together at the homesick restaurant. Eventually, the children find him, off by himself waiting at the bus station. Hesitant, awkward words are exchanged, but Beck Tull returns to the table and they finish the meal.

The book ends there. But it doesn't take a lot of living to know that nothing magic happened next. The past was not erased. Broken relationships were not put back together right away. Old wounds didn't suddenly stop bleeding. But they were home together. They finished a meal together.

If you remember the story from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, at the end of Jesus' life, he gathered with his closest friends for a last supper. It was not a pleasant evening. Friends who professed to love one another were now torn by jealousy and betrayal. The future was bleak; spilled milk was everywhere. After the meal, Jesus, who in a matter of a couple of days would give up his life for them, for us, got down on his knees, took out a towel, and began to clean up the mess. Amen.