

Faithful Presence: A Theology of Place

Introduction

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Date: 11 September 2022

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[0 : 00] Welcome, everybody. We are launching into a new sermon series, a new study for the next few weeks that we're calling Faithful Presence, and it's a theology of place. And a theology of place, if you're anything like me, may be a new concept to you. We talk about theology. I mean, we spent the past eight weeks about all sorts of different theological issues around what God is like and what Jesus did and the Holy Spirit and heaven and hell and all of that. And a theology of place was definitely a gap in my own church education, seminary education. It's just quite frankly something that I am learning all about. And us as a church that's going to recognize 10 years and next spring is something that we need to be thinking about as we are kind of on the hunt for a more permanent place to worship and serve out of, as we merge together with Resurrection City DC, as we are in a city that is always in a constant state of turnaround and turmoil and yet also has a long history under our feet. So let me start with a couple poll questions. This should be like a little web link there in Proclaim. If you go to slido.com on your phone, so pull out your phones. Looks like a lot of you, you know, live that corporate life where Slido is a thing. Pull out your phones. Go to slido.com and you can put in the code tablechurch or you can scan that QR code. And I'm, we're asking tonight, how many miles do you live away from home? And now home can mean a lot of things for a lot of people. It could mean, you know, I've seen a sign, like a Hobby Lobby sign. Sorry, yes, I was in the Hobby Lobby once. That's like home is where your mom is. Now not all of us like have moms that are alive or moms that we would consider like home-like. So whatever your definition of home is, where do you go when you go home? Where did you grow up? Where did you spend the most amount of time as a kid? I know that's a complicated question for like military brats and all of that. But how many miles do you live away from a home?

And we can see the results live in front of us. It's a race. It's a contest. Yeah, so, so far, the 100 to 1,000 miles away crowd is the largest. Maybe I could have divvied out these categories a bit more. But you also have like a almost a third more than a thousand miles, which is significant. You've got a couple folks who are in that 1 to 20, a couple fewer folks who are in that 21 to 100.

So, you know, we've heard it said that DC is often a transient city, but it's not solely a transient city. There are people who grew up here and their parents grew up here and their grandparents grew up here. The table church has a history of maybe appealing more to the transient crowd, but how did that happen? How did that value get decided or did we stumble into it? And what would it look like if we didn't appeal just to the transient crowd? All right, let me ask a second question. How many places have you lived in your life? How many places have you lived in your life?

[3 : 30] And again, you know, fuzzy numbers here. And I'm counting like addresses, okay? So, even if it was within the same city, we'll count that as a different place. How many different addresses?

Yeah, so again, about half. Oh, no, whoa, nope, don't. That bar is moving. All right, so about 43%, more than 10%, more than 10%, more than a third, 6 to 10, 3%, that one to two places.

Yeah, we're getting close to 40-40 on that 6 to 10 to more than 10. Yeah, so we Americans tend to trend towards moving a lot, which can be a disruption of our sense of place.

What is belonging when we are so transient ourselves, or at least many of us are. Go ahead and throw up those stats, Anna. So, 63% is the percentage of Americans who live outside their hometown, which is the large majority of folks. 43% are the percentage of Americans who live outside their home state. So, almost half of us, a little less than half, live outside our home state. D.C., I don't know what they consider that. Complicated question. 18 miles. Now, this is surprising. 18 miles is the median distance Americans live from their mother, which is a real stat that I found. I

can give you sources for all these if you want.

So, yes, while it's true that many of us tend to be transient, tend to live far, far away, there is a significant portion of the population who are about 18 miles away from where they grew up, 18 miles away from home. Millennials move once every two years.

[5 : 43] And then I recognize that, you know, we're not all millennials in here. Gen Z, about a third of Gen Z over the age of 18 live with parents or relatives. And you can get into the reasons why that might be around housing affordability and the economy and being underemployed, underpaid, all of that.

So, takeaway from all this is many folks don't have a big sense of place because we move constantly. But another significant portion of folks do have a significant sense of home because we're not that far away from it. And these are ideas and concepts that change and affect and form the way that we think about the cities that we live in, the neighborhoods we live in, and what's happening to us and to our neighborhoods as we all move in and out of them. Now, the Table Church has long had a mission statement that says that we want to join God in the renewal of all things. And occasionally, I've heard it said that we want it to be in DC as it is in heaven. And, you know, the original founding vision almost 10 years ago was around the church being for the city. The founding pastor and the founding team recognized that people moved into DC all the time. They did what they came to do. They went to college. They had their internship. They worked at the Hill or whatever. And then they moved out. They got what they came for and then they left. And the founders of the Table Church, they wondered what would it look like to create a spiritual community that actually caused people to stay?

That there was something so compelling about what was happening here that it would attract transient people and get them to stay. But there is that whole group of people who've lived in DC for a generation or more. And me and Pastor Tanetta and others, we began to ask, why has our focus not been on them? We've been looking and looking for a more permanent place for our church to put down some roots. What does it mean for a church, a congregation, to move into the neighborhood? And then, you know, there's all sorts of headier themes that are, you know, quite frankly, hard to sometimes wrap our minds around and get an accurate idea around. What about gentrification?

What is it? What's good about it? What's bad about it? Displacements and colonialism and rootedness of a people. Many of us in here, me included, are in this place, in this situation because of the effects of white supremacy, racial colonialism, and the displacement of indigenous people. That's not necessarily our fault, but what responsibility do we have as we wake up to those facts. And for those here who have been on the receiving end of that colonialism, what does repair look like? How do you set the terms of reparation and forgiveness? How do we think about questions about where should I live and where should I work? How do I think about the implicit or explicit racism that often goes into choosing good neighborhoods, good schools, safe cities? And how do we think about these questions as Christians, as Jesus followers? Because place and land and neighbors are massive themes in scripture that are largely invisible to those of us brought up in a western mindset. One biblical scholar has gone as far as to say this, land is the central theme of biblical faith. In scripture, land is often a character of its own. One of my favorite shows is Parks and Recreation. And what's so great about Parks and Rec is that there are the characters that get shown during the opening credits, and then there's a separate character, Pawnee the city itself, which is its own separate set of weirdos doing their own thing. Now land in scripture is also a character that has its own desires and characteristics. Land and creation in scripture produces life. That's Genesis 1. Yes, God is the creator, but God says, now the land shall produce. The land can vomit you out. The land needs rest and deserves respect. It should not be permanently sold. Creation groans for redemption. The Mother Earth motif doesn't actually find its origins in a so-called pagan worldview. The book of Job refers to being born out of Earth's womb and returning there upon death. The Apostle Paul talks about creation screaming out like a mother in labor trying to bring about new creation. But the sacredness of land and space is rarely a feature of the Western mindset. Another biblical scholar states, the overturning of space is modernity. So much of our history is about taking space and land and place from one culture and claiming it for our own. Even with time, with a capital T, we're usually more able to see it as sacred. We're at least able to think of sacred days that we observe.

[11 : 22] And we can think of the traditions and the rituals that we have placed around those holy days. But now try to think of a sacred place. Can you name any significant places in your life or the life of your family? And do you actually have traditions and rituals built around those places? The only example I could think of was a cemetery or a gravestone. And honestly, I can't think of the last time I've been to any of my family's gravestones. In general, I at least don't have a culture that recognizes pilgrimage as a spiritual practice. Now, before we move forward, I want to note a shift that I'm trying to make in my own preaching. So much preaching, at least I have heard, is about trying to make you as an individual feel guilt. Feel guilty enough about something you did or didn't do so as to force you to make a change.

But I think this sort of guilt-based preaching fails to grapple with an important fact. We're often forced into patterns and decisions that we would not otherwise make. Why? Because there are systems in this world that force us into those decisions. Even if we were to aim to become less greedy in our dealings as, let's say, business people, we immediately have a problem. Walter Wink puts it like this, the system is greedy on our behalf. There's this great quote from Walter Wink's book, *Engaging the Powers*. He goes on this example of the owner of a business who may undergo experience, undergo an experience of spiritual rebirth and genuinely desire to humanize the conditions under which her employees work. But she immediately encounters a constraint, cost. She can't raise salaries sharply and still remain competitive when a factory owner in Taiwan or South Korea is making the same product with a teenage girl laborer paid one-tenth of the salary and working 12 or 14 hours a day, six days a week. The system is greedy on her behalf. And if she rejects the system's values, she may be ejected by the system. It's not just that people are making choices about how to behave in an economic system. The system is also making choices about who will remain viable in the system. We don't contend against flesh and blood, but against the world rulers of this present darkness. Now that's not to deny our own individual responsibility. This is not a get-out-of-jail-free card, oh the devil made me do it. This is not to deny our responsibility to act as agents of justice in an unjust world. But sometimes I think we often think of ourselves too highly. The world is unjust on our behalf and we just have to go along with the flow. So I'm in an attempt, and encouraging our other preachers to do the same, that the aim of our preaching is not just to get you to feel guilty about the systems that are forcing you into nothing but bad decisions. The aim of preaching, I hope, is to unveil the evil of those systems that are attempting to malform us at any given moment. To unmask the ways in which the world works that we have been told are a given, but are in fact evil and not the way it has to be.

And specifically for this series, the goal is to help our community see place, our city, our neighborhood, our block, as the side of divine possibility. I want to read one brief scripture and kind of tie one large theme to it as I conclude tonight. This is a story about Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel.

And in Genesis chapter 28, he is leaving one place. It says in verse 10, he leaves Beersheba, and notice all the place names in this section. And he sets out for a different place, Haran, and he reaches a certain place and spends the night there. And when the sun had set, Jacob takes one of the stones at that place and puts it near his head and he lays down there. Hardly memory foam.

[15 : 33] He dreams and he sees a raised staircase, its foundation on the earth and its top touching the sky and God's messengers or angels are ascending and descending on it. You may have heard the story referred to as Jacob's ladder. And suddenly the Lord is standing on this staircase and saying, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth. You will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. And every family of the earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. I am with you now. I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. And I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you. When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, the Lord is definitely in this place. But I didn't know it. The Jewish rabbis and mystics dwelled endlessly on the mysteries of this passage. Notably, one rabbi noted the connection between the image of God and human beings and being in the very presence of God. There is no spot on earth absence of God's presence because wherever you are, God's image is. Wherever your friend or neighbor is, there is God's image. Wherever your enemy is, and that's the lesson Jacob needed to learn, there is God's image. As we walk the streets of this city and our neighborhoods, they all have histories of the indigenous peoples of the Anacostans and the Piscataways and the Pamunki people, of whom at

least 75 percent died when Europeans showed up on the Anacostan shore. Histories of self-liberated black men and women who made this city their home, their families now pushed out due to predatory land development. Histories of the people who have lived here for generations, each with their own story. God is in these places and in these people, and we, we did not know. And so over the next few weeks, we want to have a vision like Jacob. We want to open our eyes and see the presence of God in place and become more aware of how we might find our place as well.