

The Great Homecoming
Isaiah 25:6-8
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Clinton G. Roberts
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Well, friends — it's November — and if you were having any doubts about what's coming next...one might say that the heavens themselves went trick-or-treating on Halloween Night, and treated us all with a shining new world to wake up to on All Saints' morning. It was beautiful to see the sun shining through the sparkling eaves of our Forest-by-the-Lake, and our rooftops covered in snow.

I love All Saints' Day. Like my father before me, I've made sure the congregations I've served have sung the grand old hymn, "For All the Saints" each November with gusto and joy, and for myself, at this time of year more than any other, I think about what it means and feels like to "come home."

Home can definitely be a place — especially if you've lived in one place for a very long time. But for many of us, home embraces a different kind of destination: it's a "place of the heart," like the way I used to feel when I came home from college at Thanksgiving or Christmas. I can still hear Dad's deep, glad shout of welcome when I opened the door; Mom's running footsteps and her quick, shy kiss. I can see my kid brother bounding down the stairs, and my old dog barked excitedly, his tail wagging away. How I loved these moments of reconnection!

When I was away at college my freshman year at Chapel Hill, I experienced a great deal of loneliness. I would go bury myself in the stacks at Wilson Memorial Library, seeking the companionship of books. But books are no substitute for a real, living relationship, and this has made me more aware as a pastor of the plight affecting so many of our young people today.

We live today in an ever-increasing technological culture that promises to “connect” us to practically everything yet fails to provide authentic community. According to an article in this month’s “Prevention” magazine, loneliness is reaching pandemic proportions in America, especially among young people and the very old. As a growing number of Americans are living alone, technology is evolving so fast it’s having the effect of “disconnecting” many of us — particularly teens spending more and more time online looking at all the fun other people are having while assessing their own self-worth by the number of “friends” they have. Lots of older people are struggling with technology too: they just don’t have the aptitude — or desire — to keep up with all the changes, resulting in being even less connected to a world that has been changed more quickly by technology in the last 25 years than in the previous 2500.

*Last week I called on a parishioner who pulled out a flip-phone...and I had to smile. It’s the same smile I get from young people around me when I try-and fail- to be able to do new stuff with my iPhone. Sometimes I feel like just

chucking the infernal thing into Lake Michigan. But that's not going to happen, is it?

Loneliness isn't just something that impacts our emotions. It impacts our health. According to Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University, lonely people have a 26% increased likelihood of an early death. The percentage increases to 32% for people who live alone with few social contacts. A lack of social connection is considered to be more dangerous to your health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day; and while younger people and the very oldest of us are known to be the loneliest, it is middle-aged people who are most vulnerable to the health-effects of loneliness, often brought on by the loss of parents, job loss or the empty-nest syndrome.

According to Holt-Lunstad, middle-aged people tend to drink more, eat less healthily and engage in risky behaviors to numb out the pain. So whether we're talking about young people, old people or the folks in between, loneliness is a growing problem in our rapidly changing society. It's both a spiritual and a health issue. And very little is being done to address it.

The author of our Old Testament text this morning, the prophet Isaiah, knew a thing or two about being lonely. Prophets are solitary servants, called by God to speak the truth to power and warn the people of the consequences of their actions. This is not a recipe for popularity. Isaiah, who was born and raised in privilege, was a part of Jerusalem's elite: the son of Amoz and the cousin of King Azariah. He may have been the grandfather of King Manessah, who

according to rabbinic tradition, had Isaiah sawn in half when he became king. Isaiah witnessed the destruction of the sister-state of Israel in 722 BC at the hands of the Assyrians, and he lived through the siege of Jerusalem by the army of King Sennacherib in 701 BC as well. Isaiah was a man of God who lived in trying times of vacillating leadership, when God's people would just not listen to the Lord. God called upon Isaiah to deliver many terrifying oracles, but Isaiah also offered the people hope. One of the most powerful expressions of this hope — both then and now — is his vision of the Mountain of the Lord in chapter 25.

The city of Jerusalem is built upon two hills: Mt. Moriah and Mt. Zion. But Isaiah's vision of Mt. Zion is more like the glory of Zion National Park in Utah on steroids. This mountain is the lovely dwelling-place of God...the courts of the Lord, the refuge of the poor and needy, and a sanctuary from the ruthlessness of nations. As the Psalmist says:

“I lift up mine eyes onto the mountains. From whence cometh my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.? (Psalm 121, King James Version)

But in Isaiah's vision, God is making one thing more: a Great Banquet of the very finest food and wine; a Celebration not for some people, but for all peoples; and a Feast where rich and poor alike will sit down at table and eat their fill; and the Cup of their hearts will overflow with joy.

Is this what YOU believe? IS this vision what you are trusting will come to pass in the end? What do you believe happens when we die? When our heart-monitors flat-line, will we simply cease to exist? Is oblivion the last word and memory our only means of living on? I remember my parents and loves ones most every day: but memory alone is cold comfort if that's all we're looking forward to.

How many of you have lost a loved one in the last 36 months?

How many of you have lost more than one?

Do you believe that they live on somehow in communion with God, as Jesus promised, their spiritual clothing washed as white as the snow we all saw on All Saints' morning — forgiven, joyful and free?

Your answer to these questions about the future will govern the priorities you make for today:

—What you will focus your life upon;

—How you will use your money;

—And, how you will spend your time.

It's all a matter of stewardship. The stewardship of Connection. The stewardship of Life.

The Bible has a lot to say about what happens after we die. But there is a meta-narrative present in the Bible that stretches like a golden cord from the Old Testament to the New; from Mt. Sinai to Mt. Zion to the Holy City itself; and it is heard most clearly in Jesus' promise to his disciples...to make a place for us in the Father's House...a place of the heart, a place where Death will hold no Dominion, and the Disgrace of a world where a 7-year-old child dressed up as a bumblebee is gunned down on Halloween — a place where the disgrace of that will be taken away forever. How will this be possible? Because God himself will do it! Like a shroud, like a sheet, God will take away the disgrace of his people from all the earth: “for the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.”

Friends, this is the same God who stooped down now to wipe away the tears of the 7-year-old child, and the tears of her father, and the tears of us all. This is the One whom we've been waiting for...the One who sent us His Son to show us how to come home.

I pray that the vision of the Great Banquet, where we will all be together again, will keep your hearts from falling into despair. We need to reach out to each other, to stay connected, to come to this house and give generously to support the life within these walls and our mission beyond them.

Indeed, the Banquet has already started, and a place at the Table has been reserved especially for you. It's the Great Homecoming. And at this table, here

in this place, you will find the means, the foretaste, and the promise that you, too, will be there in glory.

This is the Lord's doing. "Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"