

100 Years: Home

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Ephesians 2:13-22
on the occasion of the church house's 100th anniversary, on September 21, 2025,
with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

When Josh and I got married, we received a number of lovely gifts for our house — towels and kitchen utensils and things like that. I remember struggling to know how best to articulate my gratitude for these ordinary items in each thank you note I wrote, and my always-wise mother suggested to me: “why don’t you say, ‘thank you for making our house a home?’” I confess I wondered, “how, exactly, does this blender or spatula make a house a home?” But I do what my mama tells me to do! And ever since, this contrast of “house” and “home” has nestled into my imagination ever since.

A “house” is a building, the sum total of floors and walls and bricks and siding and ceiling and nails. But a “home” is a dwelling place and enduring residence, filled with the comprehensive sweep of memories and stories and rituals and relationships and significance. Houses can be bought and sold, renovated and restored, and yes, even demolished. A home is an indwelling, never commodified or consumed, a refuge of safety, vulnerability, and hospitality where we are *enough* and can be at rest. For “to be at home somewhere is more than simply having a place to stay.”¹ Home is, as the saying goes, where our story begins.

Indeed themes of home stretch all throughout the Christian story, don’t they? From the earliest humans who made their home east of Eden, to the Israelites whose home was taken and just out of reach and destroyed and rebuilt, to the moment of cosmic significance when God pitched a tent among

¹ With great gratitude for Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh’s treatment of ‘home’ and ‘dwelling’ in their helpful book, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, p56.

creation in Jesus, stories of home – of loss and gain, of pain and reconciliation, of tearing down and building up – are stories of us. And for Christians in particular, the divine home nearby didn't just end when Jesus's particular, local life on earth drew to a close. Rather in Christ's resurrection, each individual is now a potential site for Christ to dwell and make not just a house, but a home. It's as John Donne once said, "Christ is at home with you, he is at home within you, and there is the nearest way to find him."²

II.

But precisely *how* a follower of Jesus makes their very life a dwelling place for him is where things get a bit tricky. That's the challenge that faced these early communities of Christians, where enmities between Jews and Gentiles, or non-Jews, had grown rather significant. Both of these people groups carried the message and meaning of Jesus, but after his death, the long-held hostilities between them were feeling untenable.

So what was the problem?, you might wonder. A difference of opinion about how one lives as a Christian. We can't relate one bit to that, can we? Many Jews felt that the Gentiles must convert first to Judaism in order to fully become a Christian. For the men, this meant circumcision, and to all, it meant a commitment to follow Mosaic law. For Jews, there could be no true faithfulness of a Gentile without following first these laws that had been central to the faith since its beginning. How, then, were the Jews to be in Christian community with those who practiced their faith not just differently from them, but in ways they might find *offensive*? On the other hand, some Gentiles felt that such restrictions were unnecessary, representing

² John Donne quoted in a Lenten meditation called "They Took My Lord Away" and found here: <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2017/03/27/lent-they-took-my-lord-away-by-john-donne/>

commandments to the Jews that didn't apply to them. How, then, were the Gentiles to be in Christian community with those who condemned them?

All throughout the letters from Paul and his companions to each of these early expressions of church – in Galatia, in Rome, in Ephesus – you hear this central tension expressed over and over. But Paul's response each time was clear: at the center of the good news of the gospel is that Christ has changed the landscape. Where once these distinctions of Jew and Gentile would divide and order power in a way that has some over others, in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, we all are one in Christ Jesus." Where once our identities came first from family or clan, in Christ "he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostilities between us." For anyone, this is good news indeed. But for a people seeking to be the church, the gathered body of Christ in this world, the community of practice that baptizes and breaks bread, that prays and worships, that studies and cares for one another, this is a new day.³

Do you hear the radical claims that Paul uses here? "Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Because of the circumstances of your birth manifest in your body, you who once were far *have already* been brought near. Not someday out there, not when the right politicians get in office, not once everyone finally agrees, not when you earn your way into God's good graces, not in heaven ... NO, you *have already* been brought near. Already, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but rather citizens and members of the household of God. Already, Jesus is our peace. Already, he has broken down the dividing walls of hostility.

³ Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p27-30.

Already, a new humanity has been created and is taking shape. Already, belonging and reconciliation are hallmarks of the people of God.

But lest we characterize the ministry of Jesus as simply one of breaking down walls, the writer concludes this passage with a bit of construction. For as the beloved community are fellow citizens and members of the household of God, they are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” And here’s a fascinating distinction here: scholars wonder if a more accurate translation of verse 20 speaks of Jesus Christ as “keystone” instead of “cornerstone.” A cornerstone, you see, is a foundation stone, or a stone at the corner of a building laid in a more ceremonial way. We have one right outside! But a keystone? A keystone is “the wedge-shaped stone at the crown of an arch that holds all the other pieces in place.”⁴

For Jesus, the gospel didn’t just tear down walls, it built stronger structures. Where the old walls separated enemies and perpetuated the hierarchies of certain bodies over others, the new structures brought them together into one body of Christ. Where the old walls preserved, excluded, enshrined, the new structures reconcile, welcome, hold all the pieces in place. Where once there was a house, now there is a home.

III.

Maya Angelou once said, “the ache for home lives in all of us.”⁵ In a world where such meaning and refuge are in short supply, even as shelters and spaces and houses are built all around us, we ache for home. In an age of

⁴ I learned much from Verhey and Harvard here, p112.

⁵ As quoted in Diana Butler Bass’s *Grounded: Finding God in the World*, p163.

physical and spiritual displacement, when dislocation from ways and means and hopes spiral so many into despair, we ache for home. In a culture of increased loneliness, and widespread isolation, and threats to so many who call this land their home, we ache for home. In broken relationships and fractured communities, houses too full of trauma or suffering, we ache for home.

And from this ache, too many build taller walls instead of longer tables. Too many lock tighter their doors instead of opening wider their welcome. Too many assume the hostilities between us are as permanent as the brick and mortar around us. Too many recenter their foundation out of fear or despair, indifference or injustice. Too many preserve their physical or metaphorical houses, as lovely as they are, that are empty of soul, devoid of heart, absent of spirit, aching to be claimed as home.

IV.

“Are there any other Baptists in Winston? If so, they are invited to meet at my house next Saturday night.” Thus began the advertisement written by Alfred Henry Holland in November 1870, from which the church we know and love as First Baptist Church on Fifth began. One guy showed up who wasn’t even Baptist, but simply curious. Then several women followed. From Alfred’s house, they moved to the local courthouse, where they met until they pooled enough money to build their first church house. 25 years later, as R. J. Reynolds came to town and Winston began to grow, the folks known as Winston Baptist Church had outgrown that little one-room church house. Plans were made to expand into a new, bigger space, which they occupied for another 25 years. By that point, Winston and Salem had merged. Thanks to churches like ours, Baptist Hospital had come to town. New businesses

opened, and the growth of downtown solidified west of that second church house. The congregation had expanded as quickly as the city, and their desire to be right at its heart led them westward to this spot we occupy today. And I have to assume this church house was far grander than any other house the people of now-First Baptist had ever enjoyed.

Like the first gatherings of Christians, our church started in a house. And like any occupants of a house, we have certainly had seasons where we've been too concerned with the literal carpet and the metaphorical structures. We've wondered: what if we deepen our understanding of scripture and cause our doors to open wider? What if we move around this wall, or tear down that building, or change out this governing structure, or rip out that broken way of living?

Rachel Held Evans once said "what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in." So if all these walls become simply a container for sameness, a protection against the challenges of the world, a barrier for who enters in, we will have missed the point entirely! Because Jesus Christ holds all the other pieces in place. Jesus does! Not our politics or our bank accounts, not our opinions or our efforts, not our past or even our future. For if this home is to bear witness to Jesus, we must do as Jesus did. And love as Jesus loved. And serve as Jesus served. For when Jesus Christ is our cornerstone, the foundation of our church is stronger than any concrete, any stone, any brick. When Jesus Christ is our keystone, all that we do and all that we dream to be is held together in his radically open gospel of love. When Jesus Christ is the rock upon which we build our church, our house becomes a boundless home.

At our very best, this church house is a home filled with all that Jesus

loves – with compassion and grace, with food for the hungry and healing for the sick, with release for the captives and recovery for the wasted. A home bursting with stories and hope and possibility, with people of every single kind and relationships that change us from the inside out. A home where we practice the work that Jesus has already done, breaking down dividing walls and building us together into a spiritual dwelling place for God.

Winston Churchill once said “we shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us.” The members that first occupied this space and all who have inhabited it since could have felt regal with the tall columns, fancy with the decorative plaster, above every one else because they had to walk up all those stairs that lead up to the front door. But instead of being shaped by its grandeur, I bet our ancestors and us too have been shaped by its home. Its roundness. Its warmth from the late afternoon sun pouring in. Its accessibility to all who enter in. Its capaciousness and soaring possibility.

We’ve done so because of our people – people like Colin Stokes, who, at the age of 11, was the first person baptized in this Sanctuary. Years before he’d be known best as CEO of RJ Reynolds, he was known first as God’s beloved, because we told him so, right here in this baptistry. Or people like Alonzo Williams and his son, Norman, who were the caretakers of this church house for 52 years, steadying her and keeping her for us to enjoy. Or people like the courageous congregation of Brown Memorial Baptist Church who merged with ours in 1935. People like our forebears of the 1950s and 1960s who dreamt of their church becoming a hub for the community: for basketball tournaments, and roller skating socials, and community meals, and homeless shelters. People like those of us who reaffirmed our commitment again and again to this place. People like Gary and Pat and Nancy and Olivia,

like David and Mary and Daniel and Mark, like Eva and Thayer and all who will come behind them. People like you, full of heart and spirit, of love of God and neighbor, of an unshakeable commitment to follow Jesus with all that you are. Beloved community, you make our church house our home. *Thank you!*

V.

The stories of how we've lived out that call in this place are too numerous for today, but let me offer one final one as I close. On January 19, 2007, our church gathered in the Sanctuary for a prayer vigil. The Sanctuary was being renovated, as some of you remember. The pews had come out, the carpet had been ripped up, and the space bore signs of care and restoration. But that night, more marks would fill the space, marks made from Sharpies in your hands, scrawling names and prayers and hopes for a vibrant future on the bare floor. You'd pray these words together as you celebrated "the new shine" on the Sanctuary some months later.

Scott Hudgins' beautiful prayer that day said this: *"May this sanctuary always be large enough to hold all who seek its solace – those who are rich and those who are poor, those who are family and those who are strangers, those who are happy and those who are sad. May this sanctuary always be wide enough to provide mercy for all of God's creation – the hurting, the outcast, the despised, the oppressed – the very ones for whom Jesus came. May this sanctuary always be deep enough to hold out the depths of God's grace – to those who know loss, pain, and suffering like our Savior did. And may this sanctuary always reflect the love experienced here, through generations of faithful followers who lived in the light of God's love."*

Some 10 years after that day, I and others ascended the tower scaffolding for the final time in our last construction project, where we heard

a similar story. People weren't writing on the floor, they were writing on the tower! From top to bottom, our names are scrawled. It seems that when the workers from Baker Roofing removed the old copper from the tower dome, they found that the roofers who put it on some 60 years ago had signed their names underneath: *Fred, George, Henry, Charles, John*. Our crew got a kick out of that and decided to follow suit, leaving their mark on their excellent craftsmanship to be discovered in another 60 years or so: *Jorge, Juan, Jesús, Luis, José*. With delight over such a story, we then had to follow suit:: *Gary, Joe, Emily, Amy*. Remembering those prayers down below, hidden from view but not from vision, I added a final mark of prayer: "May this be *A Boundless Home* for generations to come! To God be the glory!"

Friends, may we leave our mark on this place, making our beloved community's dwelling place a home for all who ache, for all who will enter in, but most profoundly for Jesus Christ himself for a 100 more years to come and countless after that.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, Amen!