

**“A Taste of Home”**  
**Rev. Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.**  
**Texts: Jeremiah 29:4-14, Revelation 21:1-6**  
**Myers Park Presbyterian Church**  
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“Where are you from?” That’s a question that usually comes up when meeting new people. For some, it’s an easy answer. Here at Myers Park Presbyterian, we have quite a few people who are from Charlotte. We have more than the average congregation of people whose parents, perhaps even grandparents, are from Charlotte. “Charlotteans,” is the name for those born and raised here in the Queen City. How many Charlotteans do we have here in worship today?

Of course as one of the fastest growing cities in the nation, Charlotte also has a lot of people who are from someplace else. Perhaps they came here as young adults. Today, Charlotte is the number one city for millennials to move to. I meet many people who moved here for their first job and loved it so much they’ve stayed. They will say something like, “I’m not from Charlotte, but I moved here to go to work for the bank—in ‘92 or ‘82 or ‘72 or 2002, and I’ve stayed. It’s home now.”

Where is home for you? For many that question is easy to answer. It’s not for me. I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, but I only lived there for a few years until we moved to the Washington, DC area. I lived there until the summer before I started high school. Then my Mom and I moved to Tallahassee, Florida. I only lived there for four years. I spent most summers of my life growing up with my Grandparents in Denton, Texas—that felt as much like home as anyplace. In my adult life, I lived in Nashville for six years, Atlanta for twelve, Dallas for ten, and now Charlotte for two years. Where am I from? That’s a great question. My kids might say, “Papa was a rolling stone.” I would prefer that biblical confession from Deuteronomy: “A Wandering Aramean was my father.”

Where is home for you? For the ancient Israelites, that was not hard to answer. Jerusalem was their home. It had been their home since David brought the ark of the covenant into town over four hundred years earlier. But now, the Babylonians have conquered Jerusalem. They have taken Israel’s leadership to Babylon, and installed a puppet king in Jerusalem. A false prophet named, Hananiah is telling the people, “Don’t worry, be happy. The Babylonians will not be around for long. God will quickly restore the fortunes of Israel and conquer our enemies.”

Jeremiah offers a very different word. He tells the Israelites God is using the Babylonians to bring judgment upon them for failing to act with justice; for oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow, for shedding innocent blood, and for worshipping false gods. (see Jeremiah 7.) Exile is to be their punishment, and it will last for a long time—70 years to be exact. Through Jeremiah, God tells them to build houses in Babylon, to plant gardens, to live their lives. God goes as far as saying to the exiles, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.” Seek the shalom of the city of your exile. Stunning.

Can you imagine exile? Can you imagine being taken from home, from everything you know and finding yourself in a foreign land where nothing makes sense anymore? In some ways we will all know exile in our lives at some point. We may have spent our whole lives in one place, but life has a way of dislocating us—figuratively if not literally. 2008 was a dislocating event for many in our nation, especially here in Charlotte. Many people’s lives were dislocated by that economic collapse. It certainly impacted

our church. We cut our operating budget by \$1 million that year. Ten years later, we are not yet back to where we were then. We hope to be next year. It's been an exile of sorts for us.

Whenever life as we have known it is dislocated and we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, we experience exile. In his book, Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles, Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "Exile, that is social, cultural displacement, is not primarily geographical, but it is social, moral and cultural." He goes on to suggest, "This was the case with the Jews in exile in the sixth century BCE, as it is in our Western culture presently."

Indeed, our world is not what it used to be. Regardless of one's political perspectives, it certainly seems we are in unfamiliar territory in our nation today. Partisan politics are tearing us apart. Those politics are being driven by changing realities in our nation. Demographic shifts are moving us toward a nation with no racial majority. The city of Charlotte is already there, like just about every urban center in our country.<sup>1</sup> Economically, it was once assumed that children in the United States would be better off than their parents. Today, with massive student loan debt and limited career opportunities for our largest generation, the Millennials, statistics show that is no longer the case. In some circles, modern-day Hananiah's proclaim, "All is well!" In other's today's Jeremiah's forecast doom and gloom. Who are we to believe? What are today's exiles to think?

As people of faith, we are supposed to feel like exiles. We are not supposed to be at home in this world as we know it. Wherever we consider our earthly home to be, Scripture is clear that this world is not our true home. In John's gospel, Jesus says of his disciples, "they are not of this world." In 1 Peter, we are described as "resident aliens;" in the world, but not of it. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." As people of faith, this world is not our home. We are all exiles.

Dr. Reggie Tuggle is the new Interim Pastor at Grier Heights Presbyterian Church. He served as the Pastor of First United in downtown Charlotte for years prior to his retirement. The first time I met Dr. Tuggle I asked, "Where are you from." He replied, "Originally? Heaven." Indeed, as people of faith, we are citizens of a different world, the Kingdom of God, the "Beloved Community," as Dr. King described it, the City of God, as Augustine described it. That's our true hometown. As Jerusalem was home for the Israelites, the New Jerusalem, the city of God, the Beloved Community that is the kingdom of heaven is our true home.

When I was in seminary I took Clinical Pastoral Education at Georgia Baptist Hospital. I served as a chaplain on a cardiology floor, calling on mostly older men dealing with some sort of heart problem. I remember calling on an older African American man who was awaiting heart surgery. We had a great conversation that turned toward talking about funerals. Apparently, given the surgery he was facing, he'd been thinking about his. He explained to me that in his church they didn't call them "funerals," they called them "home-goings." I love that. Then he said, "Pastor, I know heaven is my home; that this world is not my home. But I need to tell you something...I ain't homesick."

While I understood that gentleman's sentiment, when I look at our world today, it makes me homesick. This world is not our home. Our home is heaven. Our home is the coming kingdom of God described in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/charlottecitynorthcarolina/AFN120212>

Revelation 21; a world where there is no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain, no more poverty, no more hunger, no more suffering, no more death. That coming kingdom is our true home.

This past week in our nation certainly made me homesick. According to the National Sexual Violence Research Center, in the United States, one in three women experience some form of sexual violence in their lives.<sup>2</sup> That statistic has proven true when I've heard the experiences of my friends and family. This week, our nation heard the story of yet another woman and her experience of sexual violence. She was fifteen when she says it happened to her. Regardless of who you believe is telling the truth in the testimony offered by Dr. Blasey Ford and Judge Kavanaugh, regardless of your opinions about the Supreme Court, surely we can all agree that when a third of women in our nation; our daughters and our sisters and our wives and our mothers, when one in three have experienced sexual violence, we are exiled from the world as God wills it to be. How can we possibly settle for such a world? How can we respond to this reality by saying, "boys will be boys?" As God's people, we are called to point to our true home, to live into God's vision for our tomorrows; a world where the image of God in each of us is seen and valued and treasured; a world where no human being is ever objectified to serve another's demented desires. Surely that will be a better world for both our sons and our daughters. That's the home I long for; the world I seek. How about you?

What about the other challenges we face here in our city? In Charlotte, only 39% of our third graders are reading on grade level. That makes me homesick, how about you? Don't we long for a world where every child has the chance to reach their full potential instead of being placed on a school to prison pipeline at 8 years old? Apparently, here at Myers Park Presbyterian, you do. So far we have over 60 reading tutors heading to Billingsville Elementary this year—our goal is 80, we are almost there. Let's give our children a taste of home.

In Mecklenburg County, we have a shortage of over 34,000 homes for households living on less than \$42,000 a year. That's 60% of the area median income for a family of four. We are called to seek the welfare of this city, to give people a taste of home. Through Crossroads and Habitat for Humanity, our church has been working to do just that in Grier Heights for years. In the coming weeks we hope to be able to share news of an exciting new initiative that will launch our church's next chapter in our work to give those who live in poverty a decent home. By so doing, we will all experience a taste of home.

Does this world leave you feeling homesick? Hear the word of the Lord: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...build houses, plant gardens, bring children into the world... For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." That future? "A new heaven and a new earth, a new creation, the new Jerusalem; the home of God among us, every tear wiped from our eyes; mourning and crying and pain no more, poverty no more, abuse no more, death no more; for the first things have passed away."

Beloved, let's give our city a taste of home! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>