

“Guest at Your Table: The Meaning of Home”

Sara Lewis

Delivered November 29, 2020

Reading: “We Refugees” by Benjamin Zephaniah

I come from a musical place
Where they shoot me for my song
And my brother has been tortured
By my brother in my land.

I come from a beautiful place
Where they hate my shade of skin
They don't like the way I pray
And they ban free poetry.

I come from a beautiful place
Where girls cannot go to school
There you are told what to believe
And even young boys must grow beards.

I come from a great old forest
I think it is now a field
And the people I once knew
Are not there now.

We can all be refugees
Nobody is safe,
All it takes is a mad leader
Or no rain to bring forth food,
We can all be refugees
We can all be told to go,
We can be hated by someone
For being someone.

I come from a beautiful place
Where the valley floods each year
And each year the hurricane tells us
That we must keep moving on.

I come from an ancient place
All my family were born there
And I would like to go there
But I really want to live.

I come from a sunny, sandy place
Where tourists go to darken skin
And dealers like to sell guns there
I just can't tell you what's the price.

I am told I have no country now
I am told I am a lie
I am told that modern history books
May forget my name.

We can all be refugees
Sometimes it only takes a day,
Sometimes it only takes a handshake
Or a paper that is signed.

We all came from refugees
Nobody simply just appeared,
Nobody's here without a struggle,
And why should we live in fear
Of the weather or the troubles?
We all came here from somewhere.

This ends our readings.

Sermon/Homily:

Yes, we all come here from somewhere, as our reading by Benjamin Zephaniah reminded us today. We all bring a glorious diversity of past memories, experiences, ancestors, and cultures with us as we arrive here in this virtual space together this morning.

George Ella Lyons, a poet from Kentucky, wrote "Where I'm From" in 1993 in response to a line in a book "I want to know when you get to be from a place"?

In thinking about that question, she made a list-based poem:

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,

the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box

spilling old pictures,

a sift of lost faces

to drift beneath my dreams.

I am from those moments--

snapped before I budded --

leaf-fall from the family tree.

This poem has often been used as a teaching model, and students have written their own version of an I Am From poem in many a classroom. Educator and activist Julie Landsman saw this as a counter voice to the rise of hate and xenophobia in recent years, and together the poet and the educator created the I Am From Project, collecting hundreds of poems to show the beautiful diversity of our nation, and that it could be in celebrating our differences that we are brought together as a people. You can find many of the resulting poems on the website iamfromproject.com

We all come from somewhere, and we also can all become refugees, as the reading warned: all it takes is a mad leader, a handshake, or a signed piece of paper. It's the paradox of home. Sometimes we are deeply rooted in home, sometimes we are trapped there. Sometimes we are searching for a new home, and sometimes we simply want to live as free and nomadic as can be.

This year has thrown many of us into our homes in ways we've never experienced before. The global pandemic came with "stay at home orders", meant to stop the spread of the virus and keep us safe.

And yet, what of the person without a home? How are the unsheltered supposed to stay safe?

And what of the people for whom home is not safe? Those experiencing domestic violence, neglect, abuse, or other manifestations of a lack of security and safety? How can they be safe at home?

Even for those relatively privileged in these regards, staying home has frayed nerves, strained loving relationships, and left us feeling anxious and exhausted. Even for those of us who can shelter in place, the global pandemic still illustrates that our homes are all connected, just as we are all connected as people, and our walls and fences only protect us up to a certain point.

This is why I believe we can learn from this year's Guest at Your Table guests. From our guest Suja, who fled the threat of imprisonment and being targeted for being a Rohingya, we can learn that sometimes you have to leave home to save your life. We can also learn about how to form and empower community ties, and rebuild community even when home and roots have been lost.

Where in our community do people need help and empowerment? Who has had to leave or lost their homes? What community building would give people, including us, a greater sense of belonging?

From our guest Chief Shirell, whose tribe of indigenous people is not federally recognized and has not received any reparation for land seized and environmental impacts felt, we can learn about the grit and determination to keep trying to be self-sufficient and resilient. We can learn how existence itself can be resistance.

Who is forgotten or unacknowledged in our community? Who has been persisting and surviving, against steep odds? What do they have to teach us about survival? What are they owed and how can we ensure justice is received?

From our guest Mark Stege, indigenous climate scientist from the Marshall Islands, we can learn the importance of self-determination for people facing the loss of home.

In our community, who are the people that are not at the decision-making table? Whose voices are missing when we plan? What perspectives are we missing out on because the decision makers have not been able to hear everyone?

And finally, our fourth guest Adela teaches us that migrating can be an act of love. When people seek something better for their families, they do so because of the love they have, despite the dangers and sacrifices that will be involved.

What acts of love brought you to where you are today? Were there ancestors in your family or people in your childhood who faced sacrifice or even danger to get you to a better place in life? How can we help those people who are currently making that same voyage? How can we turn around and be good ancestors for others?

These are just some of the lessons of home that we can learn from our guests. I hope you will explore more of their stories, which we have posted on the Guest at Your Table padlet, and that you will support them and all the other UUSC partners by making a donation to the Guest at Your Table program. We will be collecting boxes and donations at the Drive Through on Dec. 13th.

Between now and then, we will share our homes with these guests, and all the many other virtual guests that may be welcomed into our hearts and homes whenever we reach out and do anything to help another.

I'll close with this excerpt from "The Meaning of Home" - Sermon by Rev. Laura Randall

Nobody just simply appeared. We all came here from somewhere. This earth is our home. Some of us live on the same patch of land our ancestors have called home for millennia. Others of us have called this land home for a few generations, if that.

Some of us long for a distant home we remember from our youth and others have always lived in the town we call home. Regardless of the miles between us, this earth is our home. The distress of our planet and the turmoil of our societies, these are the circumstances we find ourselves in, regardless of what we wish were true instead.

Our relationships to our homes have dramatically intensified this year. Do we have the courage to turn that intensity into compassion? Can we feel, not just know, but feel the primacy of the value that everyone, everywhere, has the right to self-determination and safety in their homes?

Some essential part of everyone longs for a sense of peace, a sense of belonging, a sense of rightness that can be described in no way other than "home." At UUSC, we will continue to honor that longing and fight for the right of all people to claim, create, and be home.

Everyone, everywhere, has the right to self-determination and safety in their homes.

Regardless of the miles between us, this earth is our home.

Do we have the courage to turn the intensity of this experience of stay at home into deep compassion?

May it be so. I invite you now into a time of silence.