

Introduction:

It’s Mother’s Day this Sunday. May mothers and grandmothers everywhere have a day of rest and blessing. And may all nurturers of children, such as aunts or other women who have a role in the lives of younger folk, know how important they are, and may they feel a sense of appreciation as well.

In fact, this is a time to be grateful for the nurturing qualities and actions of anyone, including men. God invites us to cherish one another, with special care for children and the vulnerable so that we can support development of their security and identity in the world. And so that we will model for others what it means to live a life of love.

So much of nurturing has to do with helping people feel they have a good relational home where they feel safe and valued for who they are. Our Scriptures today talk about the kind of love that compels us to find ourselves at home in – and with – God.

I John 5:1-6 [The words of John, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples]

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3 For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4 for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5 Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

John 15:9-17 [From the last teaching of Jesus before he died]

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

These teachings direct us to remember that we can 'abide' in God as we keep tuning our lives to love. In fact, choosing attitudes and actions of creative love helps us realize that we are always "in God's presence". And God's presence is always in and with us – because love 'bears fruit'. We get to taste life more richly when we "abide in the vine" of God, as Beth's reflection last week so movingly explained as she spoke about the relationship of "inter-abiding" we have with God. Even though we may experience "many struggles, crooked paths, and hidden corners," said Beth, "at the core there is a bond that is deep and strong" and if "we protect and nurture this bond... it thrives and gives vitality and vibrancy to our life."

As we continue to remember the passing of George Janzen on April 23rd, we recall how he lived by a desire to serve and bless others. Across the past years, in conversations with George and Hertha when pastoral visits were allowed before COVID, we often reflected on God's ever-present, abiding love for us, and on how, in humble service we can feel that love as it flows through us to others in practical ways. At the memorial service, I quoted Billy Graham, who said: "God has given us two hands, one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for sharing."

Sharing can be a relational characteristic that grows to abide in a family system. At George's service, we reminisced how his father had donated the land Grace Mennonite Church stands upon. So, out of love expressed in a generous act, we have had this our home church for many decades. And George and Hertha always made it good for their children to visit home, for Timmy especially. Parents love to have their adult kids visit them. My

mother, who died in 2003, lived the last years of her life in BC. When she still lived in my birthplace town in Saskatchewan and I'd call her from wherever we were living, she'd always say in a sort of plaintive enthusiastic voice (that showed how much she loved and missed and needed us): "So, are you coming home soon?" She knew I was making my own adult life with Annie and our children. But still, homecoming is so special – to mothers, especially, it seems. But also to anyone. Homecoming always renews the truth and power of abiding in relationships of love.

Abiding in God's love is all about homecomings. About realizing again and again that God's presence is *where we live, whether we feel it or not*. Of course, it would be wonderful to feel that kind of deep love all the time – being aware of our true value, and, as Billy Graham said, channeling love out into the world because we value everyone else as God does. That is true spiritual power!

How can we enrich our experience of the kind of homecomings we should enjoy in God's world? How can we abide in God and with each other more meaningfully, especially so that we can share love more and more all the time? The core answer to that question is straightforward: Every day, do something to help you 'feel right at home' in God! Reflect in prayer – maybe just a few silent moments – with gratitude about God's love for you. And for everyone. Then, live your life accordingly, day after day, that way.

But a question many of us have is: How exactly am I to think about God's presence, or about what things to be grateful for in my prayers? I offer now some thoughts from a Buddhist writer, Rod Owens, whose teachings on the "Seven Homecomings" I found in a Christian devotional guide I read weekly. Consider his good advice, and find how it can help with our 'abiding in God' and in this world God invites us to love. For parts of what follows I gratefully acknowledge this writer's inspiration.

1) The first homecoming involves remembering someone who has given guidance and support to us in life. Perhaps your mother or grandmother was one who held you always with a genuine smile or warm words. Usually we have someone who has been a guide, a teacher, a mentor, an adviser, or an elder for us. Recollect what that personal care feels like. Recall touches. Tastes. Smells. Abide in that evidence of Love in your life. Thank God for all of it. For what it meant then. What it means now.

2) The second homecoming is to trust our “wisdom texts”. Think of special Bible passages that bless you every time, such as the 23rd Psalm or the Lord’s Prayer. What other good writings and teachings have helped you deepen wisdom, clarity, openness, and compassion? Especially when feeling helpless or hopeless, it’s time to abide in (rely on) good teachings.

I recommend gathering some inspirational books to ‘give them a home’ on a shelf you can reach. I have over a dozen in front of me right now alongside my Bible as I write, with titles like *The Book of Awesome; 14,000 Things to be Happy About; Big Wisdom, Little Book; Perseverance; A Guide to Prayer; Quotations for the Fast Lane.*

Just for fun I’m pulling that last one right now and flipping it open to the section called “Home”... Here’s what my eye falls upon: “Home is not where you live but where they understand you.” [Christian Morgenstern, German poet] Good books certainly give us more understanding about lots of things in life.

Maybe start a practice of writing a few lines from your Bible and other best books into a journal or notebook where you can easily find them and ‘come home’ to them for nurture over and over. I have kept a daily journal for memories, questions, thoughts and prayers for decades – so helpful.

Whether your own best thoughts or those of other writers... abide with those teachings; you’ll find over time they abide within you!

3) The third homecoming is community. How has family or church or a friendship circle provided an experience of love, acceptance and support?

When Ezeldin Ebadalla - one of our Muslim refugee sponsorship partners (he spoke at Grace a few years ago) - heard about George, he said: “What a sad day. A man of a big heart. Whenever I visit Grace, I feel the energy and hope of the positive interfaith interaction of our two communities.”

Referring to the gourmet fundraising breakfast George had created as chef extraordinaire, Ezeldin added: “The ability to taste and enjoy food is a great blessing from God and I am sure George through his life has contributed to the happiness so many of us have enjoyed. I pray for his soul to rest in peace. My sincere prayers to his family and the congregation.”

Now that’s a powerful homecoming, when people of two distinct religions can abide in common community marked by respect and love!

Consider how Jesus reaches out to everyone, and asks us to let so much love abide within us we are willing even to care for the stranger and people we may have once seen as an enemy. Just be a good neighbour by asking yourself what you need to have and then do that also for others, Jesus teaches. A friend of mine years ago told me Jesus doesn't ask us to give till it hurts; we should give till it helps! Do what it takes to care. That's how to abide in good community.

So, always contemplate how to widen our circle of community, in the name of Jesus – as MCC reminds us to do – proving that the whole world and all its peoples are the home God loves. We abide in that world by showing compassion within it.

In contemplative prayer, think of this world of many needs. Ask God to impress on your heart an opportunity to share loving help – a little or a lot.

4) Another homecoming is the earth. Many of us come from childhoods on a farm. Some of us were – or still are – avid gardeners. Think of what earth means. Of what the planet is for – life and growth and goodness for everyone.

We abide in a global abode – a planet called Earth that we share with billions of human beings as well as all the animals and other life forms. We will deepen our sense of the presence of God as we honour our shared home by becoming more aware of ways to support efforts such as saving forests and sensitive environmental areas. Our member Kevin McCabe often writes knowledgeable information and call-to-action articles on this topic. Feel free to ask him for some guidance about practicing hospitality to the earth right here in Niagara.

Do take time to get outside every day, if possible. Breathe deeply. Watch birds and wildlife carry on their daily existence. Pray for a healthy planet.

Another great idea: Combine the homecoming practice of wisdom-reading with earth-care by finding excellent poems about the beauty of nature. At the end of this piece find a poem like that.

5) A final homecoming: Spend more time in silence. Rod Owens speaks of the “generosity of silence” – it's something that helps us have the space to be with ourself. To reflect. To pray. To seek and trust spiritual guidance.

Today, in silent surrender, focus on Jesus' promise that it is good to keep God's commandments because there is joy in that. Love sacrificially so that we can feel the fulfilment of our chosen-ness by God to be bearers of good fruit in the world.

Abiding in silence, we can cherish our self and others and Planet Earth as we come to see that we are "born of God." And, as our biblical text today about "abiding" says, "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world!"

Come home today to powerful love. And know that when we go to our final home beyond the world, the Power of Love will welcome us forever.

From a Country Overlooked [Tom Hennen]

There are no creatures you cannot love.
A frog calling at God
From the moon-filled ditch
As you stand on the country road in the June night.
The sound is enough to make the stars weep
With happiness.
In the morning the landscape green
Is lifted off the ground by the scent of grass.
The day is carried across its hours
Without any effort by the shining insects
That are living their secret lives.
The space between the prairie horizons
Makes us ache with its beauty.
Cottonwood leaves click in an ancient tongue
To the farthest cold dark in the universe.
The cottonwood also talks to you
Of breeze and speckled sunlight.
You are at home in these
great empty places
along with red-wing blackbirds and sloughs.
You are comfortable in this spot
so full of grace and being
that it sparkles like jewels
spilled on water.