

Pastor Kate shares a story about her ongoing journey with her mother, an owl, and Jesus in this message given on Mother's Day, the Fifth Sunday of Easter. The scripture was John 14:1-14. It is entitled "A Dwelling Place."

The scriptures today are all over the place, we have the story of the stoning of Stephen, the image of living stones built into a spiritual house, and Jesus' farewell discourse to his apostles. But since it is Mother's Day, I'm going to indulge myself and begin with a sacred scripture of my own, a story about my mother.

It was summer about 20 years ago. My dad had had a serious heart attack. Coming home from the hospital that night, my mother turned into the driveway and saw an owl in the trees, which sang to her all night outside her bedroom window. She was comforted by it because my father's mom used to collect everything owl, and so she felt it was Nana watching over them. When dad got home and was able to come out to the screened porch for supper, that owl would appear near in the trees and accompany them during the meal. I was living in Wisconsin at the time, and I could hear the wonder and excitement in my mother's voice as she talked about that healing owl.

During a trip home, I rose early one morning because I was anxious to see the owl who had brought such joy to my parents. I whispered into the air "I'd love to see you!" And five seconds later, down to the branch closest to me, she came. A beautiful barred owl. You know, the kind with deep brown eyes and brown and white striated feathers. She stared at me, stayed a little while, then flew off in that silent way owls have. I was stunned. It was like a moment completely out of time as we looked into each other's eyes. From then on, whenever Joel and I would visit, we enjoyed visits from the owl. My mom thought we had a special gift for calling it in as it came most often when we were around. Actually I think we just stared into the woods more!

Some years ago, the owl seemed to stop coming. Mom hadn't seen it and assumed it was gone. Then came the day she was waiting for results about a worrisome biopsy. When I called her, she didn't know anything yet. A few

minutes later, she called me in tears, scaring me, until she said no, the doctor hadn't called. But the owl had come and perched on a branch in the only possible place she could see from where she was sitting. She knew she was going to be alright. And she was.

When mom moved out of her house to a condo less than a year before she died, I wondered if the owl would go with her. After her sudden death last August, I was devastated. I kept searching for signs that she was not really gone. I found none. Just this past Thursday was my mom's birthday, and I expected a hard day. I got up early, wrote out the readings for today longhand as is my practice, moved to the sofa in our living room to pray with them. And through the open window, loud and clear, came the unique call of a barred owl. Right into my ear. Joel came in and I cried "Listen!" Through the owl, on her birthday, my mom was singing to me.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

These beautiful lines of scripture are used often during memorial services to comfort the mourning. Children often choose them for a parent. They like to think of mom or dad living in a lovely mansion prepared just for them by God. That really would not have been too comforting for my sisters, brother and me. My whole family had worked hard just the past year to move mom into her condo – and it was gorgeous! We would have much preferred she stayed there. But all of this has me taking a

second look at these words of Jesus. And I see

them differently.

“In my Father’s (or Abba’s) house, there are many dwelling places.” So much of the gospels proclaim that the realm of God, the dwelling place of God, is **right here**, right now, on this earth. When Jesus leaves his friends, are the dwelling places prepared then in the next world? Or are they right here, **wherever** he comes to them – in the breaking of the bread, in compassion for the suffering, in the face of kindness, in an instance of forgiveness? He can only fully come to them in **these places** after he has gone. And he comes as real and as vibrant as he came in earthly life, bringing joy, comfort, and an affirmation of continuing relationship.

Bear with me...I think that Jesus is trying really hard in today’s gospel to teach something not easy to grasp, but something essential about our lives in God. When we are standing next to each other, for example, there is Joel and here is me. We love each other deeply. But there he is and here I am. Separate. That’s what we experience. But when someone dies, it may take a while, a long while, but we realize their essence still remains and lives within us and around us. And the dwelling places become the moments when the beloved returns in their essence and says “Here I am.” And you **know** it is them. Such as Christ in the breaking of the bread, and in the Word, and, most especially, in the gathered community. The faith community is a prime dwelling place for all of us, living and dead, united in the Spirit of Christ.

The theological concept is one of “inter-dwelling.” Jesus tries to explain it further. He tells Philip “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works...Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do...” Just as Jesus’ Abba dwell in him, and Christ dwells in us, **so do we dwell in each other as we love one another**. Why? Because this is the Way of Christ. “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.” The way is dwelling in love...the truth is

speaking in love...and the life is eternal, as is love.

On Thursday morning, I found myself in one of dwelling places created for me by love. When the owl called, I realized my mom was right there...both in me who was astonished, and in the song. Love is stronger than death and creates dwelling places for us on earth. And even when we die, we keep coming back to them....dwelling in others through love. Amen.



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