

May 5, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel
John 15:9-17, Acts 10:44-48

I remember the first time I went to an art theatre with my friends, to see what was then thought to be a little indie movie, called “Moulin Rouge.” The theatre was a quaint little place in a suburb of Detroit, called the “Maple Art Theater,” with only three screens, and a classic concession stand. We were highschoolers and had no idea what to expect from the movie – I was there, to be honest, mostly because the girl I liked at the time had wanted to see the movie. But it was amazing – unlike the megaplexes I tended to go to, it was like my friends and I were the only ones in the theater. After enjoying *Moulin Rouge* much more than I’d expected, I and my friends became regular attendees at the Maple – not every week, or anything, but at least once a month. It became something of a home-away-from-home for the last year of highschool – we got to know several of the employees, and they got to know our taste in movies, making sure to recommend when there was a good one coming up.

When I went off to college, I remembered how the Maple had felt – a special place, a welcoming place, even if I couldn’t be there all the time. It took a while, but I found a similar place in my college town – The Broadway, a community theatre that also showed art movies a few times a year. Though I had known no one, after participating in a show, I quickly became part of the Broadway “family”¹ – I had found another home-away-from-home, and it was *almost* within walking distance of my house.

That sense of community – knowing that you are loved and accepted by others – it’s such a powerful connection. Church, though, rarely felt like that to me as a kid. I attended church because my folks required it – sure, I made friends there, and spent time in youth activities, but I didn’t feel loved or befriended by the community as a whole. Instead, I felt like I was on the periphery. Until, that is, I was asked if I could help run the sound board. At last, I had a job – something that I could do, to

¹ Friend + family

participate in the community experience. That helped me understand what the church thing was all about. I asked to be nominated as an elder – and was ordained as a “Youth Elder,” serving a 1 year term on the Christian Education committee. Understanding more how the church was run, I felt my connection to the church growing. Even though I was away for college, I spent my summers working in the church office as the church secretary and interim co-director of youth. Despite all of that, it wasn’t until I went to seminary that I found a new home-away-from-home in the church. And not just one – I had my seminary family and my church family! Ever since, this has been part of what I’ve strived to contribute to in the churches I’ve served – a welcoming place, a home-away-from-home, a family.

You see, this experience of home, of family, it’s something we all crave. We’re looking for acceptance, for a loving community. And that’s why, to me, Jesus’ words to the disciples in John’s farewell discourse ring so strongly: “I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love.”² In every place that I’ve made my home, I came in as an unknown – only slowly did I open up to my community and become a part of it. But God already loves us – Jesus already loves us – for who we are. “I’ve loved you as my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love.”

Making a home in love means recognizing that God’s love is with us, has been with us, and will be with us. Instead of limiting us, to a specific community, a specific place and time, it opens us to recognize, too, that we are a part of a wider community – all those whom God loves. And who is it that God “so loves”? That’s right, “For God so loves the world...”³ All of us are loved by God, appreciated for our individuality and connected to each other – if through no other way – then through God’s love for us. We may have other communities – love isn’t limited like geography or time. God’s love is abundant, enough and more than enough for all of us.

In the early days of the church, while the disciples were spreading news of

² John 15:9-10 in the Message translation by Eugene Peterson

³ John 3:16

God's love throughout the world, there was definitely a strain of thought that God's love was limited. Limited, perhaps, to the Jewish people. Or to an even smaller subset, those who had heard of Jesus' teachings. But, the book of Acts tells us that when Peter spoke to a group of Jews and Gentiles together, the Holy Spirit descended on everyone, regardless of their origin.⁴ Then, everyone was able to speak their own language and understand each other, praising God uniquely and together. And even more telling: the Spirit was with these people, even before they were baptized. God's love to them didn't rely on ritual or study – God's love was with them already. Once they heard the Word, once they recognized God's presence, then they could make a home in God's love – and so, many were baptized that day, and Peter stayed with them, teaching for several days more.

Making your home in love means, as Jesus told the disciples, following in the Way that God teaches us. The love is with you already – but once know it, you want to share it. Jesus teaches us to “love one another the way I loved you.” It's a love not of hierarchy, of those above and those below – but a love of equality. Jesus said, “I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends, because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.” To love each other as Jesus loves us means to love the uniquenesses and the similarities. To pray for and with each other, recognizing that we are family. Not just those gathered here, or joining remotely – but all people, throughout the entire world. It may, admittedly, take us a bit of time to get to know our extended family – but here, in this place, I hope you have faith that this is a home-away-from-home. To be comfortable enough here that you can reach out with confidence. To share the love that God has for you with all you meet.

And so, things come full circle. You see, the main character in *Moulin Rouge* is named Christian – and Christian is someone who desperately believes in love. Despite being set in 1899, when describing love, Christian shows inspiration – perhaps divine inspiration - from songs written throughout the 20th century - “A life

⁴ Acts 10:44-45

without love, that's terrible!" Christian says to Satine, "Love is like oxygen! Love is a many splendored thing. Love lifts us up where we belong. All you need is love!" And, of course, throughout the film, one line appears again and again: "The greatest thing you'll ever know is just to love and be loved in return." It's a message, wrapped in the glitz and glamor of a Baz Luhrmann film, that resonates with us. Granted, the love depicted in the film tends towards the romantic – but the quote stands for all the loves, truthfully. What if, when people thought of Christians, or even of Presbyterians specifically – what if they thought, "Now those are people who know how to love! They really make a home there."

As we look for places where we experience belonging and community, we can recognize that our longing is met in the boundless love of God. Whether it's in a quaint theater, a welcoming church, or a cherished circle of friends, these spaces become sacred because of the love we find there. We can make our home in love, knowing that God's love is without bounds, reaching beyond walls and borders to embrace each and every one of us. As we make a home in love, let us carry that home with us, assured that we are God's beloved children, and can welcome others into this home of divine love.

May the love of God surround you like a warm embrace, comforting you in times of uncertainty. May Christ, who is love embodied, lead you to extend kindness and forgiveness to all whom you encounter. And may the Holy Spirit empower you to make your home in love, creating spaces of welcome and belonging for all in the boundless grace of the Triune God. Amen.