

The House of Holy Partners
Hebrews 3.1-14
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Pentecost +3B
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My family has lived in rental double near Palmer Park for almost five years. We came here as Virginia homeowner/landlords with the hopeful thought of renting for one year while we figured out the next steps. Life doesn't often unfold exactly the way we think it will, however, and here we are in 2018 still asking some of the very same questions. But the difference now seem to be about HOW we want to live in a space and a neighborhood in particular and life-giving ways.

I haven't loved this space in which we live. That's no secret. It either doesn't quite fit who I am or what I imagined my life to be like. I'm sure there's a fair amount of ego and privilege tied up in that, and I'm okay admitting that to you and to myself. But this house has taught me so much about community and sharing space with friends. We have tied up twinkle lights in the backyard, set out more tables, squeezed in spaces for more folks to gather, dragged chairs out onto the front porch for Sunday night gatherings, danced with beloveds in the dining room, gone to sleep well after midnight with dear ones still chatting and connecting and sharing ideas in the backyard. The structure is just the space that allows the life to happen in the home of our lives.

The creator architect Frank Lloyd Wright said, "When designing a house, you have to ask what the people want to live *in*, but you must also keep an eye on what they want to live *for*."

Because there has been a shift in the way I think about what kind of long-term house will support the life my family wants to live, I am thinking more about living with less stuff, giving away things we packed and moved 1000 miles cross country and then didn't use for five years. I am thinking about open space for friends and meals and music and shared life with people we love. How can the physical space where my family eats and sleeps and grows and dwells be a support and extension of the kind of life we want to be living in and for the world?

These questions extend to us here, naturally. The Preacher of the Hebrews sermon offers us "a doctrine of the church in miniature," as Thomas Long calls it, in today's

reading, and he begins by playing with the image of a house.¹ Moses built the house. Jesus oversees the house. And now the followers of Christ are the house itself.

Long says the Hebrews Preacher plays with this house metaphor like turning a jewel in the light as the preacher gives the congregation a listening assignment.² The Preacher is not just telling a story but teaching them how to listen to the story. To let it work through you. To allow its words and layers to build a house in your life, laying a floor beneath your feet, framing walls around your being, setting a roof over your head. This house of God includes the whole history of God's people as one vast family, a spacious household embracing many generations. And somehow, through the mystery of the Christ, the church is called to embody the work of God and presence of spiritual communities across the generations.

Hear the Preacher call the congregation brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, over and over again. He is teaching them to imagine themselves in a way they have not done before. He is not supplanting Moses with Jesus. He is telling them that the work of God is not finished. The work of God continues to move and expand and transform. If you thought the way Moses' life unfolded was amazing, look even more closely at Jesus to see God's handiwork continue. And if you thought the life of Jesus was the best expression of God's handiwork, then think again. Because that work now rests on you. You are holy partners. God has been calling on humanity from the first breath of time. Be partners. Walk with me. Name with me. Steward the earth with me. Care for one another. Love one another.

God has made a house out of you. What kind of house is it? What kind of space do we need to live the way God has shaped and created and invited us to live in the world? And for what are we living in this house together? Why have we gathered? Why do we keep showing up for weeks and years on end? What is being made out of our life together?

Thomas Long offers this commentary on the Hebrews Preacher's words, "We often speak of the church as a 'voluntary organization,' something that people choose or not, but the Preacher calls us to a more profound theological understanding of the church. In the deepest sense, we do not choose the church; we are chosen for the church by God. The church is not a club for people who are fond of religion; it is a community of people who have been summoned for a task, called to a ministry, given an identity in Christ, thrown together in mission...Churches [are] 'brothers and sisters' bound

¹ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 46

² Long, pp. 50 (jewel sermon) and 49 (listening assignment)

together in common kinship to Jesus Christ, and the only way to walk away is to leave home.”³

That pinches me a bit. It's beautiful, of course, we sisters and brothers who have been called into a home together. But the pressure. The only way to walk away is to leave home? That's hard. That feels like pressure to me to hold a home together. Ah, but that's my own ego stuff creeping in again when I begin to think it is my task to hold the home of church together, right? To maintain this too-large house with too-much stuff in which we share our lives? That's not at all what the Hebrews Preacher is saying, remember? The generations before us are part of this house that folks like Moses helped to build. Jesus the Christ is the protector and guide of the house. And we, the ones called into a life of discipleship, are now the house itself. It is in us. We are in it. The life of being church is not about physical space but about the way we are growing and transforming and living this house out with our breath and words and steps.

Thomas Long is a preacher, and Hebrews is a sermon. So it's only fitting that Dr. Long gets to preaching as he talks about this morning's passage. Listen to this:

“Sometimes churches with strong budgets, professional music programs, well-equipped buildings, and the admiration of their civic communities can miss a deep truth: there is no real social justification for the church. It proclaims a word that is often not welcome, with a love that is easily scorned, to a world that is quick to be cynical, in the name of a Christ who was rejected and despised. Congregations with frail resources, meager programs, struggling ministries, sagging buildings, and not enough people to fill the choir loft may more quickly understand that, **finally, all the church has going for it is Jesus.** The church is ‘apostolic’ to the extent that it is responsive to the presence of Jesus in its midst. Wherever Jesus Christ, the pioneer apostle, is at work, however far-flung, the church is to follow, even if it limps as it goes; wherever Christ is going, however demanding, the church is to roll up its sleeves and join in, even if its muscles are not so strong. Whatever truths Christ is teaching, however controversial, the church is to confess and proclaim them, **even if it stammers as it speaks.**

This implies that, though most ecclesiastical groups have elaborate networks of committees, boards, and assemblies, authentic decision-making about mission is not primarily a function of bureaucracy but of prayerful discernment and obedience. The church does not convene like a political party attempting to

³ Long, p. 47

forge a platform or wrangle like a special interest group trying to muscle forth an agenda. Rather, the church seeks to listen to the Spirit, to discern where and how Christ is active in the world, and to become **not managers of a religious organization but 'holy partners in a heavenly calling.'**⁴

I've been trained to be a manager of a religious organization. Because the formation of ministers still very much has that mindset, it's easy for me to get lost in details and lists, projections and outcomes, minutia and inertia. Is that the kind of house we are? Is that the kind of house for holy partners in a heavenly calling? Hebrews is bringing us back to some questions we've been asking for years now. We pick them up, hold them tenderly, and then we set them back down again. Physical and metaphorical questions about what kind of house we want to live in, what kind of house are we called to be? And now we have this great question to add to ours: What does a household of holy partnership look like?

And while the Preacher isn't quite talking to us about a church of 125 people kicking around in a 45,000 square foot building, I think we have to apply the questions his sermon asks to our questions about life as holy partners here.

Have you seen those signs families put in their kitchens or living rooms or entry ways to set the theme for what kind of people they will be there? They're painted on reclaimed wood and say things like, "In this house we make mistakes, we say I'm sorry, we give lots of hugs, we laugh daily, we say I love you."

I've been thinking so much about what kind of sign we would make to name who we are here. This week the world lost two public creatives—Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain. What kind of home are we here for the Kates and Tonys in our family?

In this house we listen to each other. We see each other. We hold space when life is really dark and really scary and really hard. We tell the truth about our lives. We are vulnerable. We show up for each other and bust in some doors when we suspect one of our brothers or sisters is suffering and feels that tight grip of isolation and darkness and pain and exhaustion of trying hard for so long.

In this PRIDE month, we stand beside LGBTQ siblings who have boldly and fiercely held and hold space for one another even when their churches and country and families of origins have not held space for them. We celebrate how far we have come

⁴ Long, pp. 48-49, emphasis mine

in welcoming and affirming and advocating but are mindful of the intersections of justice where much work is left to be done.

In this house, we delight. We celebrate. We welcome. We affirm. We apologize for the times when our silence was complicit in harming people we love. We stand up and stand beside and love the beauty and diversity of our siblings. We tend the wounds the church has caused and we learn to be wounded healers together.

This week we saw more images of children (children!!!) in detention centers because they entered the United States without proper documentation. Rows and rows of sleeping children without parents. Without guardians.

In this house we push back against the highest powers when those powers are corrupt and immoral and filled with hate even if it means we are pushing against what is legal. In this house we grab the moral arc of the universe with a lasso and we bend that thing toward justice. In this house we welcome deeply without classifications of worthy or unworthy. We love because love is our command—love one another as I have loved you; by this love everyone will know you are my disciples.

My sisters and brothers, you are my family. You are holy partners in God's cosmic work. You are the very house of God. What kind of house will you be? How will we live in this house together?