

Finding Our Way Home
Homily for Ingathering Sunday
Rev. David A. Morris
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks
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It's not uncommon, especially in the South, to speak of a "church home." When I was a hospital chaplain, one of the routine questions I asked as a way of assessing a patient's spiritual needs was: "Do you have a church home?" Not everyone understands what it means, of course. I asked one patient that question, and he thought for a long time, then very seriously said, "Well, no, I don't suppose you'd call it a church home, but it's a good home, and I think we bring our kids up right."

But when we share our Water Communion on this Sunday that's often called Ingathering because in some ways it marks the start of a new church year, the end of a summer of visitors, travel, and family time, there is a sense of homecoming. So if this is our "church home," what might that mean?

There's a Robert Frost poem called "The Death of the Hired Man," a dialogue between a married farm couple. An old live-in handyman, Silas has returned to their house several years after leaving them abruptly at the worst possible time. The man wants to turn him out, even though the old man is sick. He's still angry at Silas, and he thinks he's just come to get free room and board for the winter. But the woman disagrees. In Frost's words:

"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:

You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?"

It all depends on what you mean by home."

The husband says,

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in."

And the woman answers:

"I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Something you somehow haven't to deserve. I think that phrase captures the seed of what can make a religious community "home" to us. Not that my congregational home doesn't need anything from me. Oh, no! Our spiritual community absolutely depends on each of us and all of us—it needs our commitment, our time, our talents, and our treasure--as we're each able to give them.

But at core, a congregation is home because it's a place where we cherish each other. Here in this community, in this U.U. Congregation of the Outer Banks, in this home, we cherish each other not because of anything we have, or anything we have done, but because cherishing each other is what we are called to do.

How well do we answer that call? Well, this is a real community of real people: We all forget and fall short sometimes. How easily I can become confused, and think that my needs, my interests, my offerings are more worthy of cherishing than someone else's! Maybe you've been hurt here yourself, maybe sometimes you've felt far from cherished. We all forget and fall short sometimes. But in the end, even if I feel someone's treating me badly, or mistrusting me unfairly; even if I think my needs, interests, or offerings are being given less respect than someone else's, I'm brought back to this: We are made to cherish each other, and that's what I have to try to do. Because we are family; this is our home. When we have to come here, we have to take each other in.

We bring what we can; we're encouraged always to bring as much as we can. There will always be lots of opportunities: You might choose to be part of renewing our engagement with the social action and justice work that's going on in our larger community; you might want to be part of one of the activities like the Game Nights or the Goods and Services Auction that enhance community connections among us; you might be interested in a small group or class, or in finding ways to serve and involve the families, the children and youth who are part of our congregation and those who may come to join us. And yes, there will be fundraisers and our annual pledge drive. So let me put this emphatically: I encourage you strongly to bring as much of your energy, your passion, your talent, and your resources to this church home as you can!

And yet in the end the most important thing you can do is to find your way home—to take your place at the heart of this spiritual community. Your welcome here does not depend on what you bring. The welcome is yours for the price of accepting an embrace – and offering one in return.

Home isn't a building. It isn't an organizational or institutional structure. Home is a place in the heart, a place we create together by the caring, the welcome, the compassion, support, and courageous companionship we offer one another. That's the significance of our Water Communion—that what each of us brings is precious, and is inextricably part of our common life. And in that common life we all find our true home—each of us and all of us part of the one substance and life of the Universe.

Here is a home for us – not the walls, or the beautiful art, or the wonderful music, or the uplifting or nurturing or healing programs – but the bond of community that holds us together. In a literal sense, we ARE each other's home.

So I'm new here, but this Ingathering, this Water Communion Sunday is a homecoming for me, too. I, too, enter into the bond of community here. Like you, I seek to enter a circle of cherishing because that is what I am called to do. Like you, in this community I AM home. So let me say it for all of us this morning: Welcome home!