

“A House Is Not a Home”

“O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart.”

One of the featured stops for sightseeing cruises in the Thousand Islands is Heart Island, upon which rest the remains of Boldt Castle. Unlike other castles, these remains are not the ruins of a once grand building, but the unfinished remnants of a structure that was never completely. The castle is named after George Boldt, the millionaire owner of the Walford Astoria Hotel in New York City, who began construction of a full size Rhineland style castle as a display of his love for his wife Louise. No single detail or expense was spared; beginning in 1900, a team of stonemasons, carpenters, and artists began building a six-story, 120 room castle complete with tunnels, a powerhouse, Italian gardens, a drawbridge, a children’s playhouse, and a dove cove. Boldt Castle was to be the most spectacular building ever constructed in the Thousand Islands.

But in January 1904, tragedy struck. Boldt telegraphed the island and commanded the workers to immediately stop all construction, because his beloved wife Louise had died suddenly. The broken-hearted widower could not imagine his dream castle without his beloved wife. George Boldt never returned to Heart Island, leaving behind the unfinished castle that is visited by thousands of tourists every year who walk through this monument to his love, a tangible reminder that *“a house is not a home when there’s no one there to hold you tight.”* (Burt Bacharach).

There is a significant difference between a house and a home. A house is the building in which we live, our legal residence that we declare on our census forms and driver’s licenses. It is the structure that shelters us from the elements, the place to which we return day after day. While we may consider our house to also be our home, home is far more than the roof over our heads; a home is the place where we are loved, the place where we belong. Home is that place where we are missed when we are absent, and welcomed when we return. As Robert Frost wrote, *“home is that place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”* A house may be the place where we live, but a home is the place where we are loved.

After centuries of planning and dreaming, the people of Israel finally had a house of worship in which the Ark the Covenant could be housed after centuries of occupying the temporary dwelling of the tabernacle. Even though the Lord had rejected David’s offer of building a Temple (*“Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”* (2 Samuel 7:7), under Solomon the first Temple is built in the heart of Jerusalem. By all accounts, it was a most spectacular structure; the building was 180 feet long, 90 feet wide, and 50 feet high. It was built with vast quantities of cedar wood and the choicest stones; Solomon also *“overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, then he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold.”* (1 Kings 6:21). Upon its completion, Solomon and the people of Israel rejoiced, because now there was *“a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the*

LORD that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt." (1 Kings 8:21).

Upon the completion of the Temple, Solomon gathered the people together for a grand dedication ceremony; the king *"stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven."* (8:22). But instead of praising the physical grandeur of the building and associating it with his own reign, Solomon chooses to focus the people's attention on the true importance of the Temple. Solomon prays that the Temple will be a sign of God's presence and power, not only to the Israelites but to all peoples:

- "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart." – 8:23.

Solomon asserts the incomparability of the God of Israel, beginning with a reference to "heaven above or on earth beneath," thus taking in all of creation as witnesses to the Lord's enormous power. But what makes the Lord truly incomparable are the two qualities that are at the center of God's essence and identity: covenant and steadfast love, which are celebrated by the prophet Micah at the end of his prophetic book:

- "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old." – Micah 7:18-20.

In the midst of the spectacular grandeur of Solomon's Temple, the greatest treasure of all was that it was the place in which the Lord God of Israel dwelled, the God who established his people through his covenant promise to Abraham to *"make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make you name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:2-3). The covenant promise is Israel's greatest treasure because it is their assurance that God is always with them, that God's love is steadfast and sure, that nothing can separate God's people from God's loving, enduring presence. It is the treasure that makes the house of worship that Solomon built a home for all peoples, because it is the place where the steadfast love of God welcomes all people to the place where they are loved, the place where they belong. The grandeur of the Temple comes not from the materials from which it is built, but from the presence of God that dwells therein, so that all people might *"know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments."* (Deuteronomy 7:9).

While the place where we gather for worship might not have the spectacular grandeur of Solomon's Temple, we are blessed with this beautiful sanctuary where for over a century our congregation has gathered for worship. As a one-time mission developer who served a congregation that did not have its own building, I never take for granted the places of worship where we can gather to sing God's praises, hear God's Word, and celebrate the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

When the church gathers to dedicate a new building or one that has undergone renovations, we pray that it may be *“a place for the gathering of the people of God, a place for proclaiming the gospel through word and sacrament, [and] a place for bringing life and hope to us and to this community.”* (Occasional Services for the Assembly). But no matter if the building being dedicated is a simple country church or a spectacular cathedral, what makes any house of worship a spiritual home is the one who dwells therein; for *“we pray that all who seek you here may find you and be filled with joy and peace.”* This “house is not a home” unless God is present here among us, the God whose covenant promises and steadfast love are made manifest among us *“through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.”*

One of the occasions in which people gather in this place is marriage, in which a man and a woman *“by their promises before God and in the presence of this assembly [join] themselves to one another as husband and wife.”* (ELW Marriage). Marriage is a covenant of fidelity, a promise that each spouse makes to love and cherish each other for as long as they both shall live. It is a public declaration that they have found the person they love and with whom they will share their lives, making a home with each other and their families in which their mutual love will be the foundation and cornerstone. For some of these couples, their married lives will be spent in the same location, a house that will be their home for all of their lives. For others, the location will change as life moves them from place to place. But no matter where they may dwell – a single bedroom apartment, a starter home, or a spacious mansion – what makes their house a home is the love that dwells therein, the love that is a *“seal upon their hearts, a mantle around their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads.”* In the words of Martin Luther, *“it’s the greatest blessing of God when love continues to flower in marriage,”* and those who gather to witness the joining together of two people in holy matrimony also pledge that they will uphold and care for the bride and groom so that *“their life together may show forth your love.”*

Today, we gather in this place where God’s steadfast love dwells among us to celebrate the home with which Walter and Gisele have been blessed for sixty years. It is a home that has moved on many different occasions: from Germany on an event-filled voyage, to Windsor where they made their first home in Canada, to the Stratford area where they raised their family and how to Hamlet Estates where they are active members of the community. But while their dwelling places have changed over the years, the one thing that remains the same is that their home is rooted in their love for each other, the marital vows that have been the foundation of their marriage, and their steadfast love for each other and for their family and friends that is rooted in the steadfast love of the Lord that *“never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22-23). They have experienced the true happiness that is offered in Psalm 1, the Biblical passage that was read at their wedding, which promises that true blessedness awaits those whose *“delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”* (Psalm 1:2-3). Walter and Gisele have come to his place which has been their spiritual home for many years to gather with their family and friends to give thanks to God for the blessings of these sixty years and also to witness to others that true happiness, true blessedness is found when we make our home with the Lord and build our lives on the sure foundation of God’s covenant promises and steadfast love.

- “Most people have forgotten nowadays what a home can mean, though some of us have come to realize it as never before. It is a kingdom of its own in the midst of the world, a stronghold amid life’s storms and stresses, a refuge, even a sanctuary. It is not founded on the shifting sands of outward or public life, but it has its peace in God, for it is God who gives it its special meaning and value, its own nature and privilege, its own destiny and dignity. It is an ordinance of God in the world, the place in which – whatever may happen in the world – peace, quietness, joy, love, purity, discipline, respect, obedience, tradition, and, with it all, happiness may dwell.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

My parents were blessed with 53 years of marriage, and for most of those years lived in the home on Grove Street where I was raised. It was a home in which love truly dwelled, and I am very thankful that I had the privilege to grow up in such a loving home. When the time came when my mother was no longer able to live on her own (she lived in the house for nine years after my father died), I was entrusted with the task of emptying the house so that it could be sold. When I first entered the empty house, everything was still in its place, but it was no longer our home, because the people with whom I had shared this place were no longer there. This house was not a home, because the love upon which it was rooted was no longer present. As we were loading furniture and other household items into the trucks that would cart them away, I thought of the song that Bruce Springsteen wrote after September 11, 2001 about a person who returns home following the death of a loved one who perished on that fateful day:

- “Pictures on the nightstand, TV’s on in the den. Your house is waiting for you to walk in – but you’re missing.”

A visit to Boldt Castle is both fascinating and sad – fascinating in looking at what this castle might have been, and sad in the knowledge that after his wife’s death George Boldt gave up on its construction because he knew that “a house is not a home” without the one you love. While none of us has the resources to build a castle on our own private island, each of us can build a home where love dwells, a home where all our loved and all belong. No matter where we may dwell, we are always at home when we are in the loving, steadfast presence of the Lord. Amen.