

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Isaiah 58:6-9a
SERMON SERIES: Home, Sweet Home
SERMON TITLE: A Place for the Poor

*But every home where Love abides,
and Friendship is a guest,
Is surely home, and home, sweet home:
For there the heart can rest.¹*

This verse from Henry Van Dyke is providing the theme for a series of messages on *Home, Sweet Home*. This morning's topic is *A Place for the Poor*.

Our scripture lesson is from Isaiah 58:6-9a. God's people have a complaint. They seek God day after day; they take great joy in drawing near to God; they fast so that God will hear their prayers; and yet God does not notice them. The prophet replies on God's behalf: the people are in rebellion; they are trapped in sin; they have ignored the ordinances of God; they serve their own interests; they oppress their workers; and they quarrel and fight—so God pays them no mind.

The prophet then announces the kind of fast that God requires. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

Have you ever felt that God wasn't paying attention to you even though the desire of your heart was to be close to God? Have you ever gone through all of the religious motions like attending worship, praying, reading the Bible, attending a Sunday School class—and perhaps even fasting—and yet had this persistent feeling that there was just something missing in your relationship with God?

Well, I know that many of us struggle with this sort of spiritual lethargy. I do. Sometimes I get to feeling so empty inside that I cry out to God: *Come on, Lord, look what I'm*

¹ Van Dyke, Henry. "A Home Song." *As I Like It*. 30 Aug. 2008. 30 Aug. 2008 <<http://sj-ad-infinity.blogspot.com/2008/08/home-song.html>>.

doing for you! Pay attention to me! If I'm going to do all of this religious stuff for you, don't leave me feeling so empty inside!

Now when I get to feeling this way, my first reaction is to double up on the religious stuff. Well, maybe I need to pray more or be more regular in my scripture reading, or when I fast during Lent, maybe I should skip three meals once a week instead of just one.

But you know what, I've tried stuff like this before and it doesn't always work. So what's the deal?

Isaiah points us in another direction. The prophet says in effect: ***If it seems that God is not paying attention to you, don't double up on the religious stuff—look instead to your relationships with poor: Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, free the oppressed, break the yoke.***

Now believe it or not, all of this has something to do with ***home, sweet home***—that place ***where Lord abides and Friendship is a guest***—that place where ***the heart can find rest***—because this is what God requires: ***share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, clothe the naked, be available to your own family.***

Do you see it? ***Home, sweet home*** is a place where the poor are welcomed! And the prophet says that when we act like this: ***Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; you vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.***

Jesus has even taught us that when we deal with the very least among us in this way, we are doing it to the Son of Man himself. And remember, according to Jesus, the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. Mother Theresa put it this way: ***Hungry for love, He looks at you.***

*Thirsty for kindness, He begs of you. Naked for loyalty, He hopes in you. Homeless for shelter in your heart, He asks of you. Will you be that one to Him?*²

So what does all of this look like in real life? Let me tell you about Shane Claiborne. He grew up in the Bible Belt in East Tennessee. He attended Sunday School and youth group growing up. As a youth he had what he called *a sincere “conversion” experience* at a large Christian festival. And each year when he and his friends returned to the festival they were *converted* again. Shane says: *I must have gotten born again six or eight times and it was great every time.*

In those early years, Shane practiced what he calls *spiritual bulimia*. He would buy all this Christian stuff—Christian music, bumper stickers, T-shirts, books, and even candy like *Testa-mints*. He would read the books, go to Christian movies, consume all of this Christian stuff—and then vomit the information back to his friends and the folks at church. But inwardly, Shane knew that he was starving to death.

But then, as Shane puts it, *Jesus wrecked my life*. The stuff he read in the Bible, like the text this morning’s text from Isaiah, began to work on him until his life took a profound change.

Shane and his friends from his alma mater, Eastern College in Pennsylvania, *had a hunch that there is more to life than what we had been told to pursue*. So they decided to act on a shared vision—a vision of what I would call creating *home, sweet home* among the poor. And listen for how the prophet’s promise came true for them.

Shane writes: *Poet David Thoreau went to the woods because he wanted to live deliberately, to breathe deeply, and to suck out the marrow of life. We went to the ghetto... We narrowed our vision to this: Love God, love people, and follow Jesus. And we began*

² Mother Teresa. Edited by Becky Benenate. *In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories, & Prayers*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997, 56.

calling our little experiment the Simple Way. In January, 1997, six of us moved into a little row house in Kensington, one of Pennsylvania's poorest neighborhoods....

People sometimes ask us what we do all day on an "average day" at the Simple Way. ... We hang out with kids and help them with homework in our living room, and jump into open fire hydrants on hot summer days. We share food with folks who need it, and eat the beans and rice our neighbor Ms. Sunshine makes for us. Folks drop in all day to say hi, have a safe place to cry, or get some water or a blanket.... We run a community store out of our house. We call it the Gathering, and neighbors can come in and fill a grocery bag with clothes for a dollar or find a couch, a bed, or a refrigerator....

We reclaim abandoned lots and make gardens amid the concrete wreckage around us. We plant flowers inside old TV screens and computer monitors on our roof. We see our friends waste away from drug addiction, and on a good day, someone is set free.... We share life with our neighbors and try to take care of each other.³

Now maybe I'm wrong, but to me, this sounds like *home, sweet home*—a place even for the poor! Isn't this living out the prophet's call? And I can tell you, for Shane Claiborne, it was the *something more* that he had been missing in his life with Christ.

Now I know that all of us want to be closer to God. But if the prophet is right, we can't be closer to God if we distance ourselves from the poor. If we're not ready to live like Shane Claiborne, what are we willing to do to make *home, sweet home* a place for the poor? Perhaps one small step is to say *yes* the next time Paul Taylor of our congregation is trying to recruit people to spend some time with homeless families in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. But that's just one small step. The prophet and Jesus call us to more. How shall we respond?

³ Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, 121-123.