

Home

Week 6: Make Columbia Home

May 28, 2017

As we're wrapping up our series *Home*, I want us to turn our attention back to the first text we looked at in week one. Grab a Bible and go Genesis 2.

While you're flipping there, I want to brag on a newer couple, Christian and Steph. In response to our *Home* series, they hosted a neighborhood cookout. Rallied their LG to help. Went door to door meeting neighbors and inviting them to the party.

They live in a more established neighborhood in Irmo and many of their neighbors are a good bit older than them. One lady cracked the door and before they could invite her, she said, "Not interested. please leave." So, it didn't all go perfect. But most were excited and came.

Steph said - it was pretty easy since everyone in LG pitched in on food and setting up. And one cool way God provided is that their LG is multi-generational, so when their older neighbors came, they could relate and connect easily. And when they asked LG folks, do you live here too? It lead to natural conversations of, "Oh no, we're part of Christian and Stephanie's church," and gospel conversations started up in natural non-awkward ways. That's beautiful. Normal, faithful hospitality. Applying what we're talking about here on Sundays.

Genesis 2:5-9

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, 6 and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— 7 Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

In Genesis 2 we have this picture of creation and it's nothing. It's all this undeveloped land, with incredible potential but no real organization, no vegetation, no life yet. And God forms Adam and Eve and puts them in this garden home.

From the beginning, God has always given His people a place.

In v. 7 there's a bit of wordplay we miss in the English. Man - Hebrew word *ādām* - where we get the name Adam. And the word ground is the Hebrew word *ādāmāb*. Adam's name literally means "from the ground." His identity is linked to his place. And God forms this beautiful, unique relationship and responsibility between the man and his place. Look at v. 9:

Genesis 2:9, 15

And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food...The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

So, God makes man from the ground. Then from the ground, God makes delicious fruit-bearing, life giving trees spring up for him. And then God gives man a job to work the ground he came from; to cultivate and take care of his place.

In other words, God made a place to give life to humans. And He made humans to give life to their place.

Then devastation rains down in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve revolt against God, choosing sin and independence, and we immediately see the effects of sin fracturing the world:

- Adam and Eve hide from God. Their relationship with God is broken.
- Adam and Eve hide from each other. Their relationship with other people is broken.

But that's not all. Look in Genesis 3:17:

Genesis 3:17a

And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground

(Cursed is the _____ ... the what? The ground. The *ādāmāh*. The relationship between man and his place is broken.)

Genesis 3:17b-18

because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

(The place made for man and the man made for the place aren't just going to naturally, produce everything they need for each other anymore. The symbiotic, mutually life-giving relationship between humanity and their place is going to be hard work now. Skip down to v. 23:)

Genesis 3:23-24

therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Man is evicted from his place. Sin not only affects our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. It also affects our relationship to our place. Do you see that? They're cast out from the garden. The place they were given to cultivate, to take responsibility for, now they no longer belong to that place. They become placeless. Wanderers. Drifters. Lost from home.

Part of sin's curse is a sense of placelessness.

It gives us this lingering question of, "Where do I belong?" Leads to the temptation to see your place only in terms of the goods, services and amenities for me to receive; instead of seeing it as a place for me to invest in; to put down roots and seek to see it grow.

And as you read on in the Scriptures, this story in Genesis 1-3, doesn't just happen once, it happens over and over. Over and over, God's people are given a place, they sin, turn away from God, and are cast out of that place. Adam and Eve and their offspring drift east until God calls Abraham to head back west. Back toward Eden. But they don't stay long. Through their sin, God's people end up enslaved in Egypt. So, God calls Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and back to the promised land. And they aren't there long before they're worshipping idols and getting exiled to Assyria. And then to Babylon. This pattern happens so many times that if you plotted Israel's history on a map it'd look like one of those paddle ball games with the red bouncy ball.

We might just see this as a nomadic people moving around, but to the Israelites who knew that part of your identity was your place; they'd see this as heartbreaking. God's people have no home; no place. Much of the tension in the Bible story is about God's people longing to settle into a place that can be theirs. That can be home.

I believe this placelessness is even more exaggerated in our day. Three things have happened:

1. Hyper-mobility - cars, trains and planes. We can move anywhere faster, cheaper than ever before in history. Which can be amazing! And can lead to never putting roots down.
2. Globalization - technology means we can be connected to all kinds of people and places all over the world but never actually connect with the people who live next door.
3. Careerism - Most of us don't inherit our craft from our family anymore. We tend to pursue a career and take the best job we can find based on salary and personal preferences. On top of that, many of us feel some pressure for our job to align with our deepest passions. That makes us vulnerable. "I have to pursue my career. I have to take a better job."
 - Ludovina family moving around a ton as dad chased better jobs. Each job promised dad would travel less. Each job made dad travel more. Eventually my dad had essentially no community at all. No one who really knew him. By the time he had an affair that ended my parents' marriage, there was only one friend who loved Jesus and loved my dad who tried to confront him and walk with him through it all.
 - There are large corporations like Amazon will intentionally move new employees to a new city where they don't know anyone so that the employee becomes more connected to the corporation only. This makes the employee more movable and therefore more valuable to the corporation; they can move you where they want when they want knowing your relationships and sense of place are already severed.

All of these: hypermobility, globalization and careerism contribute to our growing sense of placelessness. And this is terrible, not just because our relationship with place got broken; but also, because God is continually calling His people to redeem the places He puts them.

Jeremiah 29:7

...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Even though God's people are scattered in exile, He says own the place you're in now. Pray for it. Seek its welfare. Seek the holistic renewal of whatever place I've put you in. Where people are being mistreated, recognize it and fight for justice. Where the place is overgrown and trashy, clean it up. Take responsibility for it. Cultivate it.

As you move into the New Testament, God consistently calls His people to go to specific people in specific places.

- In Acts 1 - Jesus tells His people they will be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It's a place-based mission strategy.
- In Acts 8 - Philip called to go south to a "desert place". Literal and figurative. Bring gospel renewal to an Ethiopian who's searching for God and the church begins to spread into Africa.
- Acts 16 - Paul has a dream of a Macedonian begging him, "Please come here and help us."
- Paul even preaches this sense of calling to a place in Acts 17:

Acts 17:26-27

[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Do you hear what he just said? You don't live where you live on accident. God sets where we live and when we live and part the reason He puts us in the places we are is for the people there to find God. You don't live where you live on accident.

Part of Jesus's redemptive purpose is to redeem and restore people and places, ...through his people called to specific places.

And as Americans we're in danger of missing out on some of what God desires for us. I think poet Kathleen Norris points out this danger perfectly, "To be an American is to move on, as if we could outrun change. To attach oneself to place is to surrender to it, and suffer with it."

How foreign and beautiful is that way of thinking? That you would be so attached to a place that when it suffers, you suffer too. That you would say, I'm surrendered to the welfare of this place and whatever it goes through I'm going to go through as well. Whatever the cost to see God's kingdom invade this place. I'm going to make this place's issues my issues. I'm going to make this place's triumphs my triumphs.

When people ask you, "How are you doing?" one of your first thoughts would be, "Well how's my neighborhood? Where do I see God at work in the people around me? Cause I can't tell you how I'm doing without thinking about how my place is doing." How beautiful would that be??

Joseph Hellerman - author of *When Church is a Family* - expands on how the dangers of placelessness hit American Christians and churches:

Joseph Hellerman

Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay grow. People who leave do not grow. We all know people who are consumed with spiritual wanderlust. But we never get to know them very well because they cannot seem to stay put. They move along from church to church, ever searching for a congregation that will better satisfy their felt needs. Like trees repeatedly transplanted from soil to soil, these spiritual nomads fail to put down roots and seldom experience lasting and fruitful growth in their Christian lives.

The placelessness that results from the fall is amplified, and we suffer from it. Sometimes in ways we don't even realize. There are aspects of your spiritual growth that will never happen if you don't put down roots long enough for someone to see you and know you and hold up a mirror in love to say, "Let me help you see yourself."

I'll give you an example that sums up a lot of this. I was talking to a close friend of mine, Toni, who was around Midtown for about seven years before she moved. I want to just read you some quotes from our conversation:

"I've always wanted to move to D.C. It was my dream. I wanted to be part of something bigger and make a change on a grander scale. It was a perfect job in my field. It paid great. I got an apartment in a neighborhood I loved. And I loved it all. I still do love it... but... When I moved here, I had the attitude; 'I can just make new friends.' After all, the primary thing I was after was being part of something big. I thought that would help fill the void of people I was leaving. But what I found was that the dream job in the dream city wasn't big enough.

"It was a gut check for me. I thought I was moving for great motivations. But it was very eye-opening, and startling because I realized I was blind to my real motives; how much I was chasing adventure and a new experience.

"I'm learning what's most important to me now: I want to be a part of the community that has meant the most to me. I want to make it better. I want to see redemption in the places I care about most. In college when I heard older people talking about settling down, I always thought of it as settling. But it's not. It's building a life. And the life you can build here in Columbia is just as important and just as valuable as the life you can build in D.C.

“I don't want the summation of my life to be ‘I was a part of these big programs in this big city.’ I want the legacy of my life to be “I invested deeply in the people I care about most...D.C. is great. But Columbia is home. The grass isn't greener. It's just different grass.”

Toni's actively working to move back home in the next few years.

Ok, let's summarize; God gives His people a place. Because of sin and the fall, we experience placelessness. But Jesus restores our relationship to place to understand we don't need to chase the good life in some dreamy destination; we are called to invest our lives in the people and the places God has called us to.

So, what do we do with all this? I have one necessary and one optional next step:

Next Step #1: Bloom where you're planted.

I don't know how you think about the place that God has you in right now. I don't know where you came from or how you got here. Some of you were born and grew up here in Columbia and there's no place you'd rather be. Some of you have been dreaming of getting out of here for decades. Some of you moved here for college and you never considered staying beyond the 4-7 years. Some of you got moved here by a job or the military and you haven't even started to figure out what you think about this place yet.

Regardless of why you're here or how long you're planning to stay, God doesn't have you here on accident. So, bloom where you're planted. Put down roots and meet your neighbors. Do some research and open your eyes to see the needs of the people around you. Pray for this place. Fight for it. Connect deeply with the people in our church and your LifeGroup, expecting God to use them to help shape you, no matter how long you're here.

And whenever God brings you somewhere else, you'll be all the better trained to do the same thing again there when you get there. Wherever you are. Wherever God brings you, bloom. Put down roots. Take responsibility for the place and seek its welfare.

So, next step #1 is mandatory... and I also want to invite you to consider next step #2.

Next Step #2: Make Columbia Home.

I know we've said some things and made some jokes here and there about wanting people to stay in Columbia and we haven't really had the numbers to help you see why we've been doing that. Today I want to actually help you see why we've been talking about it. We ran the stats and found that in 2010, we had 509 members... Of those, only 57 remain. 89% are gone.

- In a 7-year time span, 9 out of 10 members have left.
- These are not just college students. Adults have moved away at pretty much the same rate as students.
- If you were in seminary in a church planting class and I described a church to you with these stats and then said “does this church still exist? You would say “no. Absolutely not.” While laughing.

It's not an exaggeration to say it's a miracle that we're still here. Thanks Jesus! Also: I love that we get to send out so many people! At this point we've sent out thousands of people carrying the biblical vision of living as JCFoM. And with this rate of turnover, it's not sustainable for us to do this indefinitely. We need to see the balance in these numbers shift.

I love getting to send so many people out every year. And I'll be honest, I really want to pastor you for the next 40 years. I want to preach your funeral... Not like soon. But someday. I want to walk alongside and pray for your marriage and see you get through the hard times. I want to see your kids graduate and help you

handle it when they inevitably do some of the stupid things kids do. I want to see you in the baptism pool with your neighbors who came to know Jesus because you stayed! I want to see and celebrate as you put sin to death.

For who God has called us to be, we need you to stay. We cannot be fully us without you. We are less without you.

For who God intends you to be, you need you to stay. There are aspects of your spiritual growth that God intend to form as you stay.

For the kingdom to come fully in Columbia, Columbia needs you to stay. There are neighbors that God intends to use your obedience to draw to Himself. There are hands only you can hold. There are acts of love and service our church won't do if you don't stay.

And I hope one of the motivations that you would want to stay is the incredible opportunity to be part of a church family that is sending out roughly 300 people every year! What a beautiful place to be. Let me say it like this:

If you want to change the world, (If you want to make big kingdom impact to the ends of the world... If you want to be a crazy rebel against American transience...) start digging deep roots exactly, precisely in the place God has you right now.

I want to end today with some immediate obedience-application opportunities. Since all of us are called to bloom where we're planted, pull up midtowndowntown.com/serve on your phone right now. I want you to read through the descriptions of our different teams and sign up for the one you're most interested in. If you're already committed to 27 things around here, don't do it. Act like you're doing it so the other folks won't think you're lazy, but for those of you who haven't put down roots, this is a great way to do it.