

“Haven for the Human Spirit”
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

[“When all the others were away at mass”](#)

Seamus Heaney

Sermon

As many of you know, I grew up in a large, Filipino, Catholic family in Chicago, Illinois. Some of my most vivid memories of childhood are of the large family gatherings we would have on a regular basis. There were many traditions and rituals that shaped these gatherings.

Most of these traditions centered around food. No matter the occasion or location the dining table would stand empty awaiting our offerings as family began to arrive for the event at hand. By the time the last guest had showed up, not one square inch of that table would be visible.

Usually, with tummies rumbling, we would gather around the table in one large circle, often with family members at the outer edges peeking in from another room because the gathering was too large to fit in a single circle.

Later in my childhood, we began to say a blessing before each of these feasts. (I don't remember doing this in my younger years, but it is possible my memory has glossed over this fine detail.)

All of the starting rituals now having been performed, we would dig in filling our plates to the brim. Usually, the children would eat quickly and then move onto playing. The adults would linger inside going back for seconds and thirds.

The stories would begin usually told in a mix of Tagalog and English which was a signature of my first generation parents, aunts, and uncles - my titas and titos. I wasn't always able to follow the details of every story, but I could usually get the gist of the stories based on the tempo, the facial expressions, the hearty laughter, or the disapproving cluck of the tongue that punctuated the tale being told.

I was a pretty shy and introverted child so there were times that I felt overwhelmed by the raucousness of these gatherings. But, I also found comfort and a deep sense of belonging in the shelter created by our family's traditions.

These traditions created a structure in my life for many years that I came to rely on and that placed me within a family unit and larger community that helped shape my identity as I moved into adulthood.

As human beings, we seek out community - people with whom we feel we can belong. In the opening words that I shared, Starhawk puts it this way: "We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community... Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power...A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free."

In community, we are received in the fullness of who we are. It is in community - amongst others - that our spirits can be free, can find rest, and can grow. Community can be a sanctuary - if not a physical place of rest and shelter then a time and a space amongst people which offers safety, freedom, and healing.

There are many places we go to in search of this kind of community - this church is likely one of these places for each of you. We find communal sanctuary amongst neighbors and friends, for some of us in our work places or in our schools.

And, for most of us, it is in our families that we first learned what it means to be part of a community. The family is the most basic unit of belonging for most of us. Whether it is the family we were born into, or a family we were brought into through adoption, whether it is family that was made around us or that we have chosen to create, family provides community that can be a sanctuary for our spirits.

Families, of course, aren't perfect. Families are often aspirational and can often fall short of our expectations. As a child, I loved to read comic strips in the newspaper. And, it was amazing to me how many were about family life. It is far too easy to poke fun at families and all the ways we can irritate and hurt one another in these mundane human relationships.

And, it is also true that instead of being a place of where we are received with love and that we find comfort, families can also be difficult communities to be part of.

I'm sure that like many of you sometimes I found my family of origin to be a haven - a place I wanted to run to to seek shelter and comfort - and sometimes I found it to be confining, and I couldn't run away fast enough.

Some of you, I know, have had to leave family behind - moving far away or just shutting the door on the past - so that you might have a chance to heal your spirit from whatever damaged was caused there.

Families are certainly not perfect, and nonetheless, they maintain an important place in our development and our spiritual health and well-being.

As imperfect and flawed as it is, family can serve as that touch point - that port from which we go out to encounter and explore the world and to which we return when the waters are choppy and the storms of life are bearing down.

I also want to acknowledge that we are all in diverse life stages in this community as people who are single with no intention of starting a family, as parents of young children and empty-nesters, as older single people without children. For some of you, the families you were born into or raised in or the family you yourself raised still hold a central place in your life. Some of you are raising families across households. Others have raised your own family and you are now participating in raising grandchildren or other children in your life. Still others of you have created family structures amongst friends and loved ones that provide the kind of loving, emotional support you need. The families you are part of - given and chosen - are diverse in shape and form.

Yet, I think for all of us, this connection to family - to a group of people with whom we can find belonging and who are there to support us through the ups and downs of life - is an important part of being spiritual people.

We are gifted with these human bodies and in them lives a spirit - a conglomeration of our tender emotions, unique personalities - all the things that make us quirkily, lovingly, annoyingly, fondly who we are.

Our spirits are tender and fragile as much as they are strong and enduring and so we need places of respite, of safe harbor, and a haven for our human spirits.

I think we easily recognize this in children. There is something biologically that tells us we ought to treat children gently and with tenderness. But, somehow as we get older, we can forget that we still remain vulnerable despite the many wounds and scars we have endured through life.

Really, it is quite remarkable that body, mind, and spirit come together to form our human existence. Life is such a gift. And to tend, to nurture, to care for our spirits housed in these bodies is not always easy.

Our spirits can be greatly impacted by the outside world. And so, it is critical that we have places, spaces - community - in which we can care for our spirits and have them cared for. Our families, however broadly you want to define that - are critical in this endeavor.

And, families need to be supported to be able to offer the kind of care that is possible when they are at their best.

Families are also under a great deal of pressure these days. Parents or caregivers are often working long hours or are pressured to figure out the best configuration of working and staying home to balance income needs with a desire to spend precious time with one another especially in the early years of children's lives. Children are more scheduled than ever and many families find themselves zooming from one activity to another during their little bit of free time - their lives in constant motion.

Attention to one another is in competition with media consumption from many directions - internet, social media, television and so many different devices on which adults and children can find entertainment and connection. And the proliferation of media and our access to it means that especially children can be inundated with competing messages about what is important, what they need - messages that shape their values.

In her book, The Shelter of Each Other, Mary Pipher writes about these conditions in the 1990s, and the conditions then were remarkably similar to now - pressures placed on time with one another, the nascent rise of the internet beginning to inundate people of all ages with media, rampant consumerism.

Pipher writes from her perspective as a family therapist having practiced for many years. She witnesses to the challenges faced by families during a time of what she calls “a crisis of meaning.” She says: “Today we’re in a more elusive crisis, a crisis of meaning, with emotional, spiritual and social aspects. We hunger for values, community and something greater than ourselves to dedicate our lives to. We wake in the night sorry for ourselves and our planet.” She quotes the singer Peter Rowan and says we are ‘thirsty in the rain.’

I admit this is a pretty grim take on the social conditions, but I do think Pipher is getting at something that is worth trying to understand and respond to. All of us now are in this metaphorical state of constant rain. As folks in this country who live further south along the coast have been experiencing lately, rain can be incredibly damaging.

The constant rain we face is from an overall state of upheaval in the broader world - from the undermining of our small ‘d’ democratic systems to the mounting climate crisis. And in this storm, we need sanctuary. We need those spaces where - like in Liza’s story last week - an umbrella might pop up and offer us shelter.

In her book, Mary Pipher argues that: “In the current family-hurting culture, families must do two things to survive: They must protect themselves from what is most hurtful to the health of the family and they must connect with what is good outside the family.”

There are six things that protect or shelter families according to Pipher: time, places, interests, celebrations, connecting rituals, and stories and metaphors.

As I have started my own family, I have reflected on how it is I can intentionally construct a family life that provides the kind of sanctuary my immediate family needs.

How do we protect time with one another and ensure that time can be truly dedicated to our presence with one another?

What places do we hold as precious and meaningful that we want to stay in relationship with over time?

What interests and passions do we hold in common that can continue to bring us back together?

How do we celebrate life's joys and commemorate life's sadnesses?

What do we do that connects us to our family's histories and to other members of our family?

What stories are emerging that we can come back to and continue to tell and re-tell over time?

To support our families and communities as havens for the human spirit we must cultivate intentional practices.

Some of you have shared with me the practices that shape your own family life...

- celebrating each person's birthday in a special way
- returning to a favorite hiking spot or camp site year after year
- making this church part of your Sunday morning routine

And within our own church family, we also strive to create a shelter within which we can each feel that we belong that we are challenged to grow. From March Mystery Madness to No Rehearsal Christmas Pageant, our To Say Their Names Service, and the many acts of service we participate in together - these traditions and connecting rituals give shape to our shared life and help us build a loving community.

Ursula K. Le Guin said, "Love doesn't just sit there like a stone: it has to be made like bread, remade all the time, made new."

So it is in our families, and also in all of the communities to which we belong. We continually remake love, make it new through our efforts.

When it comes down to it, this re-making of the bread of love is found in the intimate details.

Seamus Heaney writes of these details in his poem, "When all the others were away at mass..." He describes the ritual of peeling potatoes with his mother. "I remembered her head bent towards my head, Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives – Never closer the whole rest of our lives."

The intimacy of moments like this create the haven that our spirits so desperately need.

Those moments in which we can know ourselves fully loved, sheltered from the storms of life if even for a brief time.

May we together create a safe harbor and safe haven for our spirits.
May we create an re-create love anew.

Amen.