



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Mansions and Tiny Houses

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places..." We do about 18 funerals a year here at Trinity and this is usually the Gospel that is read. It is lovely and comforting with a sense of continuation and something more and better to come. It's just what you want for a grieving family. In older versions *dwelling places* is translated as *many mansions* which gives the impression of heaven as a grand, ultimate gated community sort of place. As if everyone's idea of heaven would be to live in a mansion. But I don't think that Jesus would be promising that. Jesus' promises are more down to earth than that.

Habitat for Humanity has been helping people who would never otherwise be able to own a home since the 1970s. The Habitat motto is "a hand up, not a hand out." I was blessed to serve on the Board of Directors of the Habitat affiliate out in California and saw first-hand what it meant to families to get the keys to their houses after they had worked on their houses, taken classes on homeownership and qualified for their mortgages. It was touching and humbling. And then there was the experience of the volunteers who spent their days off helping to build houses for people that they had never met but were destined to become friends for ever. It was always a beautiful thing. To date, Habitat has helped build or repair over 800,000 homes and changed the lives of over 4 million people. Stable housing means better health, education and general success in life. The Habitat families began to have abundant life.

There is something of a movement developing called Tiny Houses - charming little dwellings that are smaller than a storage shed or motor home. It is being driven, literally (for some of them are on wheels) and figuratively, by people who want live very simply, without a mortgage, without many possessions. The houses are ingenious and often too cute for words. The average American home is around 2600 square feet. These tiny houses average 186 square feet but some are as small as 99. What this movement is doing is, not only going against the grain of the bigger is better and the we all need lots of stuff lifestyle, but it is creating a economic freedom for the people who are willing to try it. Tiny House dwellers who build their own houses (also part of the movement) pay around \$23,000 to own their homes. As a result, they have more savings, less credit card debt partly because they don't have any place to put stuff that isn't essential. More women than men are going the tiny house route.

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But some communities are recognizing that tiny houses are a viable solution to homelessness. From Wisconsin to Texas, to New York, volunteers are helping people who have been living on the streets to build their own homes. These houses are built with hope and love and they will change people's lives - with safety, security and dignity.

Another kind of dwelling place that I'm interested in is built out of 2 liter soda bottles which makes them important for a number of reasons. First, they keep plastic out of landfills, the material is readily available and doesn't cost anything. They are filled with dirt of other trash and set in cement. Another benefit is that they are sturdy and snug. A two bedroom house takes about 14,000 bottles. Americans throw away the equivalent of 9257 two bedroom houses every day. Talk about a stewardship issue! We have been talking to our friends out on the Crow reservation about these soda bottle houses as an alternative for people who are living in drafty trailers with no heat. Perhaps we'll have the opportunity to work on one some time.

In each of these examples, love and compassion and hope dwell. Just the kind of dwelling place that Jesus would promise. He was preparing his disciples for the time when they would have to perceive his presence rather than see him physically. But I think he was telling them something else as well. Dwelling places can certainly be housing units but Jesus spent a lot of time trying to help them understand their relationship with God, that God dwells within him and them. You see, we are the dwelling places of God and once you get that, life is just not the same. The question then becomes, what does it look like to be a dwelling place for God?

I don't think that that is the kind of knowledge that you can have and ignore. It should change you in some way. It must make you stand up straighter, take good care of yourself, be kinder to people, forgive more easily, connect to others in a deeper way. Volunteer at the Arts and Craft Fair. Feed people who are hungry. Everything that Jesus tells us about this way of life is positive, hopeful, strengthening, all of the good stuff. But the world wants us to doubt it. The world wants us to mind the gaps between us and overlook the connection. It wants us to struggle to get by so we don't have the energy for being God's dwelling place. It bombards us with negative messages and wears us down with struggle and sorrow. I get it. And so does Nicole Curtis. She the star of my new favorite TV show called Rehab Addict. It's not about a 12 Step Program or detoxing. Nicole rescues condemned houses and brings them back to life. She doesn't just rehab them, she restores them and watching these houses come back to life is a spiritual experience.

Often the houses that she gets are in pretty bad neighborhoods, with bullet holes in the windows, water damage from burst pipes, fixtures ripped out and stolen, burned or just covered with decades of all manner of grime and neglect. What they look like when she is done is magical. It usually takes several episodes to see the whole process of restoration, and in that

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time you see the setbacks, the unexpected challenges, the things that just can't be fixed and have to be torn out and replaced. But you also see the hardwood floors uncovered, sanded down and buffed into glory. You see people from the neighborhood so excited that this blight property is going to lift up their block rather than drag it down. And so they come by and help, pulling up old linoleum tiles, painting, chopping down overgrown bushes and taking part in the wonder that unfolds. It is the best illustration of salvation on television. Every time I watch, I feel so hopeful. The houses go from broken wreckage to lovely dwelling places. Nicole says that all she does is to uncover what has always been there.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are made of good stuff, with charm and elegance sometime hiding beneath wear and fatigue, that we are meant to be dwelling places of love, joy, made by divine design. Jesus wanted his disciples and therefore us, to know that even if he isn't here in the flesh, we can know who we are and that we have all that we need to give hospitality to God's mission. We are the many dwelling places in the Father's house, the places where love abides and where all are welcome.

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