

Simon's house was too small. Oh, it was big enough for his brother Andrew and for himself and for his mother-in-law. There was space enough for healing one sick woman and serving family and some guests, even on the Sabbath. But it soon proved too little to hold all who wanted what Simon's mother-in-law had received from Jesus, to be taken by the hand and lifted up and healed.

I'm struck by how fast the good news of Jesus' healing abilities had spread that day in Capernaum. Because shortly after the sun had set on the Sabbath and people could round up their sick and possessed loved ones and haul them over to Simon's house, the place was overrun. "The whole city was gathered around the door," Mark writes.

Neither the local synagogue nor Simon's house were big enough to handle everyone who needed Jesus' good news. And I wonder if for a moment Jesus wondered if he could manage the demand. I wonder if that's why he got up so early, while it was still dark, to consult with his Abba. I wonder if when they discovered Jesus gone, Simon and Andrew and James and John feared that Jesus had given them the slip. Perhaps that's why Mark says they hunted for him.

So, this early morning in Capernaum I can just imagine the tension that Jesus and his followers are experiencing – perched on the precarious give and take of God's message. They are up against the obstacles that the world throws between humanity and God – And they are up against the sheer demand, the overwhelming need, too big to meet in one small city, in one house.

And so, Jesus decided to make the house bigger – that house where people might experience the hospitality of God, share life with God, which is called holiness. What Jesus demonstrates today in the Mark's Gospel is that he came to open the door wide between humanity and God, that in fact he came to be that open door. And that required removing the things that keep people from making it to the door at all.

So out go what Mark calls the demons, which make people ill by the way they defy the holiness of God, that try to name Jesus and get power over him, that try to undermine the new thing God is doing in the world.

Out go the weaknesses and soul sickness that prevent people like Peter's Mother-in-law from engaging in the service – the *diaconia* – that the true disciple is called to.

Out go the perceptions that make the space and the time seem too small and the crowd too big, and the fear that Jesus might just give everyone the slip. Instead, Jesus will walk right into the center of it with the message that he's been sent to give, and he will take his disciples with him. They won't lose track of him again.

"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" Jesus tells his followers.

And the house gets bigger, the tent gets wider and the door, which is Jesus, comes right to the ones who need it most. The message from God is, come in. I'm reminded of that lovely line from our first reading

from Isaiah, as the prophet imagines God as one ... “who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in...” The space God makes for us is that vast.”

The last time I preached this sermon on these readings it was 2021, four years ago at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Because of COVID we had limited seating available in the pews. About 70 people were on the live stream. We were in the middle of doing and being church in an entirely new and uncomfortable way. I imagine that it was similar here at St Peter’s.

The ways available to us for worship seemed profoundly isolating and lonely. We had to let go of all the physical things that helped us to experience a God who is at hand. We had to give up our ability to gather, to taste Eucharistic bread and wine, to feel the vibrations of organ music and choir song, even the creaking of the pews beneath us.

The challenge then for us was to look for the ways that Jesus was casting aside the obstacles and bringing the Kingdom of God to us in entirely new ways.

And that was going to require us to imagine something new. Or maybe it meant seeing what all along had been there and what remained if we removed the walls and the ceiling and the pews. What remained of church as we gathered in a tent that had been widened to include living rooms and kitchens and cars spread over counties and beyond, whose windows were computer and cell phone screens.

Could we feel the flow of the collective prayer and worship that we were engaging in at that moment? I wondered. Could we feel the power of our combined presence, the depth of our receptivity to Jesus’ good news that the Kingdom of God was here?

I admitted at the time that it would take a great deal of imagination. But that is the place where God most clearly reveals the divine self, this immense visionary space stretched like a curtain, spread like a tent to live in. We might even mix the metaphor a bit and call it a live stream, I said.

That day, I suggested that we really see ourselves as the church that we had become, spread out across the community, connected by the live stream. We entered an imaginative space with all the others who were tuning in, acknowledged that we were with each other at that moment, considered with whom we occupied that tent of worship and that dwelling of God.

Four years later, in a different church, with most of us gathered in the pews, and some of us joining online, I think it still might be a good practice for us – to visualize who we are with at this moment as church, connected by physical presence and by technology, and who we are within the wide tent of God. So, let’s do it. Let’s practice here and at home – even if you are watching a recording later, you can do this too.

I invite you to take your eyes off the screen or off me and close them, give them a rest. Become aware of your breathing. Now let your inner eye, the one that envisions things -- slowly open.

There are typically about 10 people tuning into this livestream right now. Afterward about 120 will stop by the recording for a minute or two. And there are probably about 80 to 90 of us sitting in the pews right now. I want you to imagine all of them. Imagine them in the spaces that they are in right now – at home, here, downstairs in Godly Play, up in the choir loft. Imagine that all the rooms that we are in are connected one to the other. Just collapse the space and distance even the time that separates us. Let

the walls between us drop away. Let's just sit for a moment with one another ---because we are really present to one another, as we share this moment, this visioning, this prayer.

Let faces come to mind – perhaps familiar or unfamiliar ones. As you breathe, in and out, they breathe with you. Their eyes are closed as are yours. They are familiar and mysterious.

Now imagine that what fills the space among us is the love of Christ, the presence of God – feel its warmth at the very center of you, extending outward. Love is what you are breathing in and out. Love is what collapses the distance and removes the walls. Divine love is what connects us in this moment.

Now look beyond the people sharing this moment on livestream and in-person and widen your vision to all who are at prayer in one way or another right now – in churches and synagogues and mosques, and temples, at home, in small groups, in vast assemblies all over the world. Imagine all who are turning their hearts to a God that none of us describes the same way, the none of us can imagine accurately. Consider the power of that outward flow of worship, intention, praise and lament – so much bigger than the house we are in.

Now include all who deeply long to be united with the love of God, those who yearn for the removal of the obstacles that get in the way of being that deeply loved and fully welcomed. Imagine them in this wide tent that is God's home with us. Imagine Jesus meeting them where they are, healing them, restoring them to health and life as he did Peter's mother-in-law and the crowds who spilled out onto the streets.

Lift up your eyes on high and see:

Who created these?

*He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;*

*because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.*

Let us just be with one another for a moment, enjoying one another's company, God's company. And when you are ready open your eyes.

Amen.