

---

*1 Samuel 16: 1-7, 11-13*

*2 Corinthians 5: 6-9*

It's June, which usually means the NBA playoffs of Men's Professional Basketball.

Having lived in six different states spanning Hawaii to Delaware, I have rooted for any number of teams... and now have my pick when it comes to rooting for teams... and which ones I can show pride in. So when my beloved Golden State Warriors lost their final two games and were eliminated from the playoffs, I had other teams to choose from.

As any sports fan knows, playing at home or away affects a team's chances of winning. At home, most teams statistically play better. They are more comfortable in a familiar setting with friendly fans. But any team that's going to win a championship must learn to succeed away from home.

The first time many of us learned to succeed away from home was going off to college or getting our first job that could pay our own rent. Yet this past year, over 2.6 million young adults from 18 to 29 moved back home with their parents, leading to over half of them living at home last summer... the highest percentage in this age group in over a century.

According to a recent NYT article, many of these parents and children actually treasured their newfound time together, although it was not without some adjustments.

Both parent and child would probably use that opening line of today's Psalm 20, *The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!*

Not everyone is comfortable or even safe at home. My hometown of Austin, Texas, feels a little less safe now, given the horrific and senseless shooting this weekend. Too many communities in our country are suffering from this other epidemic, gun violence, which strips away any sense of safety and security we might have in our lives and livelihoods. As if last year wasn't bad enough, 2020 was the deadliest gun violence year in decades. And as of September 1st, anyone over 21 in Texas will be able to openly carry a loaded gun, no license necessary. I'm a proud Texan, but I'm not always proud of my home state.

June is also Pride Month, celebrating the diversity of our LGBTQ community, as seen on the rainbow painted rock on our way into worship this morning. There is a lot of shame in being different, of not feeling welcome in your own home or hometown. The painful history of this community notes that a feeling of comfort many of us have at home can feel far, far away for many others. Home may be a place of familiarity, but we don't always find our biggest fans there. Sometimes we need to hit the road and see what awaits us away from home.

With the upheaval of this past year caused by the coronavirus, I often wonder where we feel at home these days.

For many, the vaccine has helped end the pandemic and return to a more familiar life. Yet despite all of the scientific evidence so far, there are some who are not comfortable, either with getting the vaccine themselves or with the protection it has proven to provide. And we still do not have a vaccine option for the youngest among us.

Perhaps many of us felt at home yesterday, being welcomed back to the church grounds for a jazz worship service and all-church picnic. Or for those who have joined us for in-person worship, perhaps it has felt a little like home being back in our sanctuary. Others are simply enjoying a meal in a restaurant once more. Then there are those of us who are taking the opportunity to travel again, to get away from home in order to feel refreshed and relaxed again. Recently I took some vacation to Hawaii and some study leave out in California, taking time to see friends and family. Yet when all is said and done, many of us will conclude, "there's no place like home" even after we've traveled that yellow brick road.

Some have enjoyed working remotely, or even having work at all, while others have yearned to return to face-to-face encounters with anyone outside their home - even their most challenging colleagues!

Some have embraced the change in pace and lifestyle, while others can't wait to get back to "normal."

Home or Away, we have our... ambivalences about what is better and what is worse. All we ask now is for a schedule of when we're home and when we're away... one that won't change each week based on viral conditions or government guidelines. Is that too much to ask? Or is the world still on fire?

I wonder if the Prophet Samuel was wondering about home as he wandered away far from home in a world on fire.

In our Old Testament passage today, we find a prophet who has fallen out of favor with his embattled king. God no longer favors Saul, the first king of Israel, and for Samuel to be God's messenger on earth, he must reject his own king and no longer play for the home team... for his allegiance is greater than to king or country, giving all Glory to God.

## *Home or Away*

June 13, 2021

The Reverend Evans McGowan, Asst. Pastor of Faith Formation  
& Campus Ministries

He is now tasked with picking Saul's future rival and successor, David, but has no idea who or where he is.

I wonder how Jesse felt welcoming this prophet to his home. Was he afraid one of his sons would be chosen as king? Or was he proud that one of them might be chosen for this honor?

Pride is a funny thing. It's about identification with one team, one party, one nation.

We can take pride in our sports teams, even when they don't meet our expectations. We can take pride in our work, in our kids and in our family... but it's a little harder when we don't meet our own expectations.

We can take pride in our country, particularly as Americans, in developing several effective vaccines and gradually distributing them to the world in desperate need of protection. It's a little harder to have pride when we also recognize we are the biggest weapons exporter in the world as well. We are a country that bails out the bankers yet rebuffs the babysitters and other childcare needs to support our families. Our Declaration of Independence refers to Native Americans as savages, and our Constitution counted slaves as 3/5ths a person.

This is America, the home of the free, built on the backs of slaves, the land of the Constitution and contradictions. We have always struggled between the feelings of feeling at home, and feeling far, far away.

And so we return to Samuel, who is struggling with choosing the next successor for his people in a time of turmoil and strife. The sons of Jesse come forward, but none are the chosen one. And here we get an insight into what is happening - it is not the outward appearance that matters most, but the inward cultivation of the heart. And when all is said and done, Samuel sends for the shepherd out in the fields, the essential worker everyone has forgotten about, but without them there would be no food on the table.

I wonder who are the shepherds of our society today, the ones who do the essential work of taking care of our food sources.

Recently I was in a conversation with people who worked in the restaurant industry. They were talking about the difficult work of waiting tables... sometimes called, "service with a smile."

"It isn't easy." one said, "It has to come from the heart. It doesn't come naturally."

We often think things that come from the heart should come naturally. But in a world on fire and full of contradiction, it can be really hard to know what's going on in our hearts.

The hard work of service work is to truly listen to the person in front of you, despite any disagreement or disparaging remarks. It's what I call heart-work.

Heart-work is happening at home right now between adult children and their parents.

Heart-work is happening in our communities right now as we struggle to implement better methods of policing and protection.

Heart-work is happening when we open our hearts to reconcile with neighbors and friends.

Heart-work is trying to understand the other side, even when we vehemently disagree.

Heart-work can even happen in defeat, when we congratulate the victor and still have a sense of pride for our team who fought hard.

Heart-work isn't easy, but it's immensely rewarding. It requires not relying on what we see but on what we feel. So whether we are feeling at home or far away from home, let us take the moment to really feel the feels. Let us take time to pray, to worship, to be in nature, to be silent... to take the time to shut our eyes and really feel with our hearts.

I believe it is from here in our hearts in the stillness of our souls where we will find this confidence Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians. So whether we are at home or away, we go forth in love to do the hard work of heart-work.

**The Reverend Evans McGowan**  
**Assistant Pastor Faith Formation & Campus Ministries**