

# Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

March 2009

## Dwelling at Home

**W**e are designed to live in God.

It has taken me many years to understand this truth, because often I've looked for home in ultimately unsatisfying places. As a child, I thought home was wherever my parents were. As a single young adult, I thought home was wherever I had my bed and clothes. In the early years of our marriage, I thought home was wherever Jenny (my wife) was, and later wherever she and our sons were. While each of these imparted to me a certain sense of home, none fully conveyed the fullest meaning of home.

I've also sought home in buildings. Thus far in my peripatetic life, I've lived in 17 apartments and houses scattered in 10 locations across 5 states. In each dwelling I tried whenever possible to find a satisfying home by rearranging, refinishing, refurbishing, and repairing to make my residence as close to the ideally perfect home as I could make it. Though I've spent tens of thousands of dollars in this pursuit, in each place contentment has eluded me.

For some people, home is about finding perfect human relationships. We suppose we will finally be content if we could only find that handsome, sensitive, and financially successful husband; or that gorgeous, caring, and intelligent wife; and then raise two smart and perfectly behaved children, preferably one a boy and the other a girl. Then our

yearnings for home would become reality.

Only recently have I come to realize that all these projects to create a sense of home are doomed to disappointment for the simple reason that none of them were ever intended to be our true home. Our efforts to create a physical home fail because authentic home is not a physical place and does not exist in geographical space. Our yearnings to find a perfect relational home with other human beings stumble on the reality that our true home is with no human being, though human beings can nevertheless give us glimpses of that true home.

Our home is in God. We are designed in such a way that we will be persistently restless whenever we try to locate a home in anything or anyone else. Augustine (354-430), the second most influential theologian in Christian history after Paul, famously observed in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions* that "you [God] made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you" (translation by R.S. Pine-Coffin).

### Indwelling

This is why the gospel of John em-

phasizes indwelling as the great goal and gift Christian faith. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places," remarks Jesus in John 14:2, and "I go to prepare a place for you" (NRSV). In my childhood, I thought these words meant that Jesus was getting ready to fly through the air to heaven so he could prepare grand, expensive mansions for us to live in after we die. (After all, the old King James

Version said "in my Father's house are many mansions.")

However, John 14 is not talking about heaven. The Greek word *monē*, which the KJV translated as "mansions" and the NRSV translates as "dwelling-places," is dif-

ferent entirely than *ouranos*, the word for heaven. Although the Old Testament sometimes imaginatively located God's house in the sky (e.g., Ps. 2:4, 113:5-6, 123:1), the idea of God's house (*oikia*) in the gospel of John is not the same as heaven.

*Monē* comes from *menō*, a verb meaning to "remain" or "dwell." Together they appear about 36 times in John, and are a primary way this gospel conveys that our true home lies within God. Jesus goes ahead to prepare dwellings for

*continued on reverse*



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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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## Dwelling at Home (continued)

us inside of God. This is not geographical language or even spatial language, but relational language. The house of God is a new kind of relationship consisting of the highest possible intimacy. In this house, God dwells within Jesus and Jesus dwells within God; and in turn, Jesus dwells within us while we dwell within him (see John 17:21).

But how do we come to live in God? How do we arrive at, and dwell in, this authentic home?

The short and obvious answer is that all spiritual disciplines move us closer toward this home in God. These include tending the earth, serving the neighbor, praying with and for others, pondering the meaning of scripture, and many more.

Yet some spiritual disciplines seem particularly adept at opening up at-homeness with God. None will accomplish this overnight or even after a year. Only sustained practice over long periods of time is likely to impart us with a sense of mutual indwelling with God. Here are a few that I've discovered to be important.

**1. Community.** The gospel of John proposes a partial answer: that we come to live in God only when we live in community with those who are also seeking to dwell in God. The focus of true community is never on itself, but on the God who shapes and sustains the community.

For John, dwelling in God is not an individualistic enterprise. An individual's personal relationship with God in Jesus is not irrelevant, but it is also insufficient. Lone rangers are not likely to come to full communion with God. Even the Carthusians, a highly solitary order of monks and nuns, situate their members in community.

**2. Solitude.** We can understand solitude as the practice of attending contentedly to God while being alone. The degree of solitude needed will vary from person to person and will change at differing periods of the life-cycle.

Solitude is not antithetical to community. Indeed, those who know how to be in solitude often become the strongest members of a community, while those who cannot or do not know how to be in solitude may become some of the neediest, most difficult members for a community to relate with.

**3. Silence.** The Christian contemplative tradition asserts that a regular practice of silence is usually required for finding a home in God. Over time, silence that intentionally seeks God has a capacity to peel off the inner projects, self-delusions, and cacophonous voices that encrust our inner being.

As I write these words, a neighbor is gunning his four-wheeler down the street, polluting the air with excess noise and thick blue-gray smoke spitting

from the tailpipe. I do not know the man, but I wonder if he might be seeking a rush of adrenaline to momentarily alleviate the numbness of a life lived outside of God's home. In any case, I've not yet seen a book on four-wheeling as a contemplative practice.

**4. Awareness.** In the end, our home with God is not so much something to find as something to perceive. Our mutual indwelling with God is a gift of baptism which we nourish through virtue and discipleship. As we do so, we may gradually perceive that home has in fact been there all along, waiting for us to see it. The key is our growing awareness.

What is the experience of mutual indwelling with God like? Since the experience is ineffable, we can at best only evoke it with metaphors. One way of describing it comes from Meister Eckhart (1260-1328): "The eye with which I see God is exactly the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowledge and one love" (Sermon 16, translation by O. Davies).

### TV Show to Air on *The Dark Night*

Beginning the week of Wednesday, April 29, "Time for Hope," a syndicated TV show based in Spartanburg, South Carolina, will broadcast a half-hour interview with me about my book, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God*. This show airs on about 70 stations and channels across the United States, Canada, and Europe. To see if a station near you carries this show, go to [www.timeforhope.com/schedule.asp](http://www.timeforhope.com/schedule.asp), scroll down to the maps, and click on your location.

If no stations in your area carry the show, you can watch it on their website ([www.timeforhope.com](http://www.timeforhope.com)) for about 8 to 10 weeks after the air date. You'll need a high-speed connection.

