

## **“The Redstone Unit Project”**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
on Sunday, August 26, 2018 by Rev. Catherine Somerville  
Scripture Readings: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 and Psalm 84

What does the word “home” mean to you? Is home a place of sanctuary from a busy world? Is it a familiar place where you are surrounded by your memories and your treasures? Is it a gathering place for family and friends? Or is it a dusty place because the dust hangs like hoarfrost over everything – you haven't had a minute to clean?

Today, both of our readings invite us to consider the idea of home. First, the Joshua reading, one piece of an ancient liturgy, intended for the renewal of the covenant between God and the people at Shechem. Joshua brings together the heads of the tribes, the judges, and the officers. Then he brokers a relationship. “Long ago,” he begins, “your ancestors lived in far away lands, beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. But now, we will revere the Lord.” Joshua's words continue to ring through the centuries: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” In this case, home is about identity, about a clan of people who share roots and blood, proclaiming to the world that they will live as followers and servants of God. This God will be with them not only in their prosperity but also in their suffering and in their trials. This God promises to be present through all that life brings.

Psalm 84 speaks about the home we find in a worship space: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts.” The song continues with images of sparrows and swallows finding room, making home. Believers are invited to make home in the temple, the place of sanctuary. But I also think about how our own homes are places of sanctuary, places where we can seek and find God in the quietness and busyness of living.

Just the other day, someone sent me an email. I hadn't heard from her in a while, but I was a bit surprised, because I had just been thinking about her that very morning, as I was having my shower. I wrote that to her, and I said I knew it must sound rather weird for me to be telling her that I had been thinking about her when I was having my shower, but my home is a place where thoughts of others and prayers for friends sometimes find their own resting places. Sitting on the deck looking at the garden, making dinner, doing chores, and yes, even sometimes in the shower, I call people to mind. I pray that they will be held in the healing light of God's care this day. I had prayed for my friend that morning in the shower.

God makes home in the places we call home.

This morning, I want to tell you about a place of home for over 78,000 Ontario residents. In this province, there are 630 nursing homes. They are controlled by over 300 sets of regulations that keep staff focused on the tasks of feeding, scheduling and cleaning, all documented by government collection. Any of us who have ever gone into a nursing home know that it a detached, antiseptic end to life. Long term care facilities can be challenging places to enter, and when you visit, you have to look hard for moments of grace, like

families bringing in coffee and time, or the arrival of the pet therapy dogs, and staff who smile and offer a bit extra care.

But you also see beige coloured walls and people planted in front of blaring television sets. There are long hours when no programming or interaction is incorporated, and residents are herded in groups into dining rooms that are overcrowded and chronically understaffed. The sound of call bells are heard ringing all the time, twenty four hours every day.

David Sheard looked at all of this and saw possibilities. David comes from England, and he is a specialist in nursing home innovation and dementia care. His company is called Butterfly. He manages 37 homes in the United Kingdom and Ireland, six in Alberta, five in Australia, and one in the United States. Someone heard about his work in the Peel Region in Mississauga, Ontario.

David Sheard came and assessed the dementia unit in one of the long term care facilities in that region, called Redstone at Peel Region's Malton Village. This place houses twenty-five residents with advanced dementia, people with names like Fred Smith, Inga Cherry, and Peter Wojcik. Fred Smith paces the halls endlessly. He lashes out at every staff member who tries to provide his personal care. The staff is angry and frustrated that they face his fists and his wrath every shift. Inga Cherry spends each day sitting at the end of a long hallway, staring at the traffic speeding down Derry Road. She tells anyone who listens, that she is now trapped in a cage. She used to love going for drives in her Chevy Vega, with the top down. Peter Wojcik was once a nuclear researcher in Russia. Now, he never speaks a word.

When David Sheard made his assessment of this unit, he declared it empty of kindness, laughter or any semblance of hominess. Technically, one of the best run homes in Ontario, according to data gathered in terms of feeding times, personal care, and scheduling, it rated the second-lowest possible in terms of emotional-based care, virtually one of the most uninhabitable places of any long term care facility David Sheard has ever visited.

Without improvement, this picture, in other long term care facilities across the province, will be the lonely existence for hundreds of thousands of Canadians. Currently half a million people in this country are living with some form of dementia, according to the Alzheimer Society, with annual costs to the health care system and family expenses reaching over 10 billion dollars. By 2031, the number of people with some form of dementia is expected to hit close to one million. The annual costs for health care in this one sector alone are estimated to top 16 billion dollars.

Some people in Peel decided that the best they were doing was not enough for the residents of Mississauga. They decided that it was time to change things up. They wanted help for families and for residents. They wanted them to know that people once thought to be lost were still worthy of love and a place to call home.

Sheard and other long term care specialists went first to Mississauga's city council, where David made a promise. If the council would give him \$100,000 for paint and staff training, he said he could turn Redstone around in one year.

Everyone expected a fight at the council table that night. Like all city councils, money is so tight. But the councilors gave his presentation a standing ovation. One after another, they spoke of how their own lives were impacted by dementia. The mayor's grandmother had been victim; Councilor Thompson's wife is exhausted caring for her mother at home; Councilor Starr's wife developed Alzheimer's disease in her early 50's and died at the age of 69.

The council voted to give it a try.

The project began with staff training, using the field of emotional intelligence. Staff members were invited to remember their own stories of loss and fear.

They were invited to remember the things that bring them joy. They were trained in how to find openings into the residents' lives, by listening and by inviting conversation. They learned that emotional memories will come every few seconds for a person with dementia. Imagine no one reaching out to you when you are afraid. The staff was shown how to do the reaching. Instead of saying to a resident who is calling for her mother, that "she is 84, her mother is dead, and she now lives in a nursing home", the staff are trained to remember what it was like to be ten years old and lost. "Tell her that mom is busy right now, but she will be around soon."

The atmosphere began to change. A piano was brought in, and lots of sheet music from the 1930's and 40's was made available. Blocks and puzzles were put out for people who had spent all of their lives being busy. Now they had things to do. Old typewriters are set up on desks; china cabinets with dusting cloths and polish, baskets with towels that can be folded and unfolded are sitting waiting for someone who needs work to do. They have installed a putting green for the former golfers. There are colourful magazines, dolls in every human rainbow colour, and people who had once been caregivers, are invited to hold a doll when they feel lost or walk them in baby carriages left in the halls. When Fred Smith, the man known for hitting staff, was given a doll to hold, he put it to his shoulder, and whispered to the doll in his native language, "You are my life."

The staff is invited to wear their regular street clothes. There are no more uniforms. When residents are being fed, the staff is encouraged not just to shovel the food into waiting mouths as fast they can, but to talk about what it's like to eat peaches in the summer time. Let the residents peel the oranges and touch the food. People build appetites that way, and well-fed people are healthier, less prone to dehydration, and skin breakdown. There is now a mini-fridge in the dining room, and anyone can come in at any time, to find milk, bread, butter and jam. There is no reason people with dementia should be hungry.

Most obvious of all, the beige walls have been painted into the bright colours of the 1950's, lovely greens and oranges. There are murals of gardens. Now, interesting pictures of

smiling, happy residents and staff form the art on the walls; soft blankets are available for people to cuddle in; there are hats and boas for people to dress up if they have the desire.

When the residents now state that they want to go home, the staff is prepared. “You are needed here,” they say. “You live here. It wouldn’t be the same here without you.” Can you imagine being told that you matter?

After a year, Mississauga City Council invited Sheard, staff, residents and families to come and tell them what had happened. One family member addressed the council. She said, “This is how much I believe in this home. When my mother first came to Malton Village, and the Redstone Unit, it was very institutional. My mother was a private person, so she spent most of her days in her room with the door closed. As the Butterfly program progressed, I noticed that she was out of her room more and doing things with the staff. And the staff was changing. Not the people, but the attitudes and beliefs in how to deal with people with dementia. When my mother died, I had pictures of her from Malton Village all over the walls of the funeral home, because she was smiling at the end of her life. People who were non-verbal or who had progressed back to their first language were starting to speak again. Some even spoke sentences.” She summed her thoughts up with these words, “I know it’s a bit selfish of me to say this to you, the city council, but one day, you and I will be in nursing homes. To live in a place that is more like a home and a family, is where we all really want to be.”

City council voted unanimously to keep funding the program in Redstone and they added the program to the other four nursing homes in Peel region. They also approved a motion that requires city staff to become advocates for change, and work to get emotional intelligence care into nursing homes right across Ontario.

What does the word “home” mean to you? Could it mean something like this? A place of compassion, love and welcome? Is it a place where all of God’s people are offered the dignity of care that they deserve in all the stages of life? May the places we call home reflect our deep values and the knowledge that God is with us, and no one is ever alone.

Sources Used:

**Feasting on the Word**, Year B, Volume 3, pages 207-209; **The Fix: One Peel nursing Home took a gamble on fun, life and love. The most dangerous story we can tell is how simple it was to change.** Moira Welsh, Toronto Star Newspapers, 2018. (Peel Region’s Redstone Dementia Unit)