



The New England Church Pulpit

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HEAVENLY MANSIONS AND IVORY TOWERS

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John 14.1-7

Jesus said to his disciples "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my father's house there are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responded, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. If you know me, you will know God also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Tao Te Ching 39

*In harmony with the Way (Tao),
the sky is clear and spacious,
the earth is solid and full,
all creatures flourish together,
content with the way they are,
endlessly repeating themselves,
endlessly renewed.*

*When humanity interfere with the Way,
the sky becomes filthy,
the earth becomes depleted,
the equilibrium crumbles,
creatures become extinct.*

*The Master views the parts with compassion,
because she understands the whole.
Her constant practice is humility.
She doesn't glitter like a jewel
but lets herself be shaped by the Way,
as rugged and common as a stone.*

Be not afraid; there are many mansions. Many dwelling places, as one translation says. When I grew up I was fascinated by mansions that I saw in pictures. As an adult, I continue to be fascinated with them, perhaps overly fascinated with them, as I have toured many in Europe and here in the States. It intrigues me to see how the well-heeled lived, and the art and architecture they admired, many of these mansions now beautiful museums in their own right. .

As a kid, God's many mansions, we were told, were inside pearly gates and glittering with gold. This idea of heavenly mansions captured my imagination, a place I most definitely wanted to go when I died. I didn't catch on to the discrepancy of God having many mansions but only for the select few, which, we were told, we certainly were part of. But then I grew up and decided the golden mansions in heaven was as bogus as heaven itself, an attempt to reward good behavior, conformity to belief, and a consolation for all we didn't get in this life.

So I read this passage now and pause at the phrase "many mansions," pondering its meaning for the here and now where we are called, I believe, to make heaven on earth for the good of all.

So I look for the mansions in this world where those who might otherwise be afraid can dwell so that their hearts are not troubled. Have you heard about the one called the Magic Field in Murfreesboro, TN? It is the brain child of Red Sox pitcher David Price who created a field of dreams by literally leveling the playing field so special-needs youth could play baseball. Kids in wheelchairs, and those with walkers, girls and boys alike, regardless of their abilities, can play ball, run the bases, and enter into friendly competition on a field that builds confidence and stimulates mental and physical stability. Each player has a personal coach who is with them through every swing of the bat and every step between bases, to minimize their fear and assuage a self-doubting spirit. The field is made of rubberized surface that levels the obstacles of other fields, and also includes playground equipment for kids who don't want to play ball. Complete with scoreboard, a concession stand, bleachers, and locker rooms, the Magic Field is one of those mansions where God dwells to quell troubled hearts. Who needs a mansion with pearly gates and streets of gold in the great by and by when you can play ball on the Magic Field today?

In his book on the Lord's Prayer, John Dominic Crossan envisions God not just as father or mother, but householder who oversees the dwelling place of those who live within. God as the householder has many mansions in this world that is God's household. And the dwelling places of which the gospel writer speaks is more than a place; it implies family, a circle of trusted friends, a mindset where the broken, the suffering, the sidelined, the grieving, the haves and the have-nots, the healthy and the sick, the weak and the strong are part and parcel of one another. God's household is too big for anyone to be excluded.

So if there are many mansions, enough for all, to whom are we being summoned to share that good news? Who would be set free by knowing that no matter who they are, or where they are on life's journey, they are welcomed? Is it the kids in school who feel like failures because they can't keep up with their studies? There's a dwelling place for them, and you can be their tutor. Is it the Syrians who have fled unmitigated torture that are looking not only for a dwelling place but a community in which they are accepted, so their hearts are not troubled? Is it the Muslim who has been unfairly connected with ISIS, and who needs to know that Christians aren't the only ones to have mansions in God's household? Is it the mother and son who are now father and daughter after discovering the gender into which they were born is not the one by which they identify emotionally and spiritually? Their story is compelling. Many mansions.

Who else needs to know about these many dwelling places? Is it you? Many of us have it all put together on the outside, and we look like we have life all figured out, but inside we're churning and unsettled and not certain even if there is a god, let alone one with a dwelling place for us. Is it you who wants to be a good mother but who is often paralyzed by the world in which your children are growing up? Is it you whose head is cast down because all hope has drained from your soul and faith feels like an old dream? Is it you who needs to be reminded week after week here in this sanctuary that you are already loved, fully claimed by the family of faith, who already are at home, who hear from brother Jesus that you are already living in one of the divine dwelling places?

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and I think about the many people who, like me, suffer from a mental illness. Living with clinical depression I know what it's like to find little motivation and even less energy to face even the best of days. I'm one of the lucky ones for whom drugs work most of the time, but there are millions who can't find that goldmine for their illness or who don't even want to find it. And millions more who can't afford it. Is there a mansion for them? Can we help scientists find new drugs and make them affordable so these troubled hearts can have a dwelling place?

And what about the people with addictions that have such a tight grip on them they can't function without a drink, or cocaine, or sex, or food or a codependency and have little motivation to kick the habit? Is there a magic field for them? There is if we can support those dwelling places with therapies and skilled therapists available to all. It may be a mansion of tough love, but as such it is a dwelling place of care and health.

On this Mother's Day, many of us would cite our mothers as being the point person for creating a mansion for us—in our younger days a physical one, and in our adult years a supportive, encouraging, loving one. Mothers are often the driving force in that lifelong household in which our value systems and social well-being still reside.

I saw a cartoon this week that was comprised of two frames. The first featured a streetcleaner with his broom and dustbin sweeping up trash. A well-to-do mother said to her son, pointing to the man, "This is why you need to go to school so you don't end up like that." The second frame is the same scene, with a well-to-do mother saying to her son, "This is why you need to go to school so you can make sure people like that earn a living wage."

Many mansions. Places of acceptance. Inclusive environments where troubled hearts find peace. Multiple dwelling places as myriad as there are people. "If it were not so, would I have told you that I prepare a place for you, all of you, each of you?" Jesus queried. "And if I prepare a place, will I not empower you to live in one of the many mansions of the household of God? It is a rhetorical question. This spirit of life, this force that keeps moving through its cycles of the seasons; this evolving force that is forever new and yet as old as the rugged and common stones that were formed 10 billion years ago; this energy that explodes on the edge of the universe creating new stars is the universe of many mansions where the spirit and energy of God dwells; this is the presence of God who never left us and is coming back daily to rehab our dwelling places to make them more accessible, more dynamic, more inclusive, more enjoyable.

The Tao Te Ching reminds us that the master views all the parts of creation with compassion because she understands the whole. Her constant practice is humility. Likewise, we must be very diligent about our understanding of many mansions lest we become isolated—and isolating—in our ivory towers of wealth and privilege, prejudice and fear that cast aspersions through narrow windows on those we feel are beneath us.

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the sky is clear and spacious,
the earth is solid and full,
all creatures flourish together,
content with the way they are,
endlessly repeating themselves,
endlessly renewed.

So...

do not let your hearts be troubled, for in God's world there are many mansions. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann