
REDEEMING HOME: A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF PLACE IN A PLACELESS WORLD

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In 2011, a sleepy southern town gave everything to one of its own. Ruthie Leming was a wife, a mother of three daughters, and a well-loved middle school teacher in Starhill, Louisiana. And she was dying.

When Ruthie and her brother Rod were growing up, Starhill was a town of nearly 2,000 people. It was the kind of town people liked to watch in movies: Friday night football games, family dinners on Sundays after church, and graveyards filled with multiple generations of families who lived and died within the city limits.

When doctors diagnosed Ruthie with terminal cancer, she found the community at her door: they cleaned her house, fed her family, and paid for medical bills while her husband continued to work at the local fire station to try and make ends meet. As her prognosis worsened, Ruthie carried on loving her family and community, praying God would heal her body and preserve her life. Her friends and family watched as she endured treatment without complaint, and this deepened the sense of community shared by those around her, rooted in their commitment to her family and wonder at her strength and resilience. When she died, they celebrated her life: the

community gathered and rejoiced in her faith, determination, and love. Starhill's residents paid for her funeral, started a college fund for her daughters, and continued to love Ruthie's family like their own. Starhill is a small town with deep roots.

In his book about his sister's life, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, Rod Dreher notes the fundamental difference between Ruthie's life and his: she *stayed*.¹ She stayed close to her roots in Starhill, and invested in the lives of people around her even while she was dying. Through their commitment to place, Ruthie and the people of Starhill created a community that carried on in her absence. Some people who never experience a community like this long for Starhill, with its picket fences, front-porch swings, and mild summer evenings. But the longing for a community like Starhill points to something deeper than material comfort: it expresses the innate desire to be known and cared for, as Ruthie Leming was. People long for place as it was meant to be, place as it will be one day. Places surround and shape a person's identity as they move through life, often from one city or region to another. People "live, move, and have their being" in places. We create new places—cathedrals, villages, and homes—for refuge and rest, seeking some form of consistency and peace in an unsettled world.

WHAT IS PLACE?

Places, beautiful and mundane, may be found in cities, villages, seaside ports, and people as well as in structures. Place is the emerald-green British Isles with their rich history and dying churches, their prosperous families and urban poor communities. Place is the familiar, wrinkled faces of loved ones who have seen more hardship and joy than most people around them. Place is the coffee shop that invites you to stay. Sometimes places are warm and welcoming, sometimes dark and distressing. Place is both the garden of Gethsemane and the empty tomb. It is a complex phenomenon, filled with many unanswered questions. But it is also as ancient as the earth: God created the world as a place for his people, and called it good. He implaced humanity, creating a home for Adam and Eve in Eden. At their most basic, "places are the ground of shared human

¹ Rod Dreher, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming: A Southern Girl, a Small Town, and the Secret of a Good Life* (New York: Hachette Book Group), 2013.

experience as well as the product of shared human experience.²² Place, according to Jennifer Allen Craft, is “not just a piece of ground—it is the undeniable fact of our existence *in relationship with* the whole of creation.”²³

In Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, God sent his people to various places for diverse reasons. God spoke the world into being, into places. He made Adam, breathing life into him and giving him dominion over the Garden of Eden. From Adam he created Eve and placed her in the Garden to help and complete Adam. Throughout the Old Testament, God continued to use places to draw his people to himself: Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years before God gave them a place of rest in Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. God used places for both restoration and destruction, often creating parables from places. He used places to demonstrate his holiness, power, and covenant-keeping love toward his people through his promises to bring peace and justice. The New Testament is also filled with the idea of significant place and placemaking. Mary and Joseph left their home to be registered in the census at Bethlehem. God placed himself into the story physically, sending Jesus, who was born in a stable. His implacement into the world he created is striking and beautiful, as he became “the God made low to raise us up”²⁴ from sin, death, and ultimately hell. The Word became flesh and dwelt among his people. Jesus’ life was full of places and people who were shaped by his influence: his twelve disciples, the Roman guards and centurions, the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross. The empty tomb and the upper room are indispensable elements in Jesus’ story. Places are integral to the human story, from beginning to end. In *Where All Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*, Craig Bartholomew explains that

Place is never fully place without God as co-inhabitant. Place is thus always, in one way or another, a theological concept... After Eden the challenge of implacement and the danger of displacement are a constant part of the human condition. Humans remain placed, but displacement is a constant threat.⁵

2 Jennifer Allen Craft, “Making a Place on Earth: Participation in Creation and Redemption Through Placemaking and the Arts” (Ph.D.thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2013), 23.

3 Craft, “Making a Place on Earth,” 10.

4 Bob Kaufin, “God Made Low,” *Prepare Him Room*. Recorded with Sovereign Grace Praise (BMI). Sovereign Grace Music, 2014, 1 CD.

5 Craig Bartholomew, *Where All Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 31.

God gave the creation mandate—the call to make a place in the world—to Adam and Eve first, and it remains binding on the church today. As Christians redeem little parts of the world, working faithfully to care for others and their places, reflecting the gospel, they reflect Christ.

A theology of place should begin and end with God as the ultimate place-maker, the one who creates places and people for times and seasons only he knows. But the idea of place also involves human lives, choices, and ideas. In addition to the physical connotations of “place,” the word “can also become a metaphor for theological, philosophical, social, or political ideas.”⁶ Place is more than a location, the spot where someone takes a holiday, or where a student sits through courses each semester. Place both embodies and shapes human society. Starhill, Louisiana, shaped Ruthie Leming and her family, both directly and indirectly, and was shaped by them. The small town shaped her brother Rod in different ways, however, pushing him away from the farms and simple rural lifestyle to bigger cities, graduate schools, and places dedicated to intellect, beauty, and power. Places shape souls and seasons of a person’s life whether they realize it or not.

THE EPIDEMIC OF ROOTLESSNESS

Rootlessness is the antithesis of the steady, settled home, the central place in most human lives, and it has reached epidemic proportions, especially in America. For authors like Wendell Berry—agrarian essayist, activist, and poet—this rootlessness is a result of industrialization and the loss of real community. While Berry settled his family in rural Kentucky, making a career out of farming and writing, others chased the American dream in cities, foregoing a quiet life for money, prestige, and fame. His life was shaped by a small town in Kentucky as he worked to shape it for the better, through diligence and hard work. Berry writes with a sense of peace about his place in the world, saying “My work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place.”⁷ For Berry, his chosen and native place supplied the sense of rest

6 Craft, “Making a Place on Earth,” 20.

7 Ragan Sutterfield, “Imagining a Different Way to Live: Wendell Berry is Inspiring a New Generation of Christians to Care for the Land,” *Christianity Today*, November 15, 2006. Accessed November 25, 2016.

his soul needed. He understood where he belonged in the world—rural Kentucky—and he stayed there, just as Ruthie Leming stayed in Starhill, where she felt she belonged.

Modern urbanization has changed small communities since the Industrial Revolution, which in America began in the early nineteenth century. This technological shift began as an endeavor to help communities provide for their own, but also came with sacrifices as people lost valuable jobs on farms, and automation changed manual labor forever. Since this time, urbanization only continued to grow, and many people have moved out of rural areas into metropolitan cities seeking better jobs, more cultural diversity, and the glittering allure of prosperity and prestige. Nevertheless, as Robert Brueggemann suggests, “It is now clear that a *sense of place* is a human hunger that urban promise has not met.”⁸ Modern urbanization has led to a growth in travel, both abroad and across the United States, leaving many people in airport terminals, hotels, and taxi cabs more often than not. As Walsh explains in *Beyond Homelessness*, “mobility produces homelessness;” a fear of “missing out” plagues most contemporary Americans, causing them to bristle at the notion of stillness or a slower pace of life.⁹ According to Walsh, corporate America is the primary cause of this migratory way of life. Loyalty to place is commonly undermined by a desire for wealth, and the pursuit of independence and autonomy:

Both postmodern tourists and global capitalists want to keep their options open, whether for the identities they will construct in cyberspace or the products they will buy at the mall. Both value choice over loyalty. And both remain deeply homeless because being at home is seen to be a limiting of choices and requires an acknowledgement that we are not autonomous but interdependent and interrelated homemakers.¹⁰

As Walsh suggests, the problem is not just urbanization; technological advances allow people to be in many places vicariously, which gives them a

8 Robert Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 3-4.

9 Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

10 Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 263.

false sense of connectedness while disregarding the importance of face-to-face human interaction. A sense of rootedness, whether acquired organically or deliberately, is critical to human flourishing. Brueggeman emphasizes that “it is *rootlessness* and not *meaninglessness* that characterizes the current crisis. There are no meanings apart from roots.”¹¹ Humanity struggles to fix what has been broken since Genesis, since the introduction of sin into every crevice of the world.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve alienated themselves from God, each other, and the Garden of Eden. They said “yes” to the forbidden fruit, and darkness entered both the world and the home. The first human beings doubted God’s goodness, and sought autonomy and independence. They became “homebreakers,” passing down this estrangement for generations.¹² Genesis describes both the creation of places and their desecration through sin, and Adam and Eve inaugurated an exile, which impacts people even today.

PLACEMAKING: HOUSES, HOMES, AND WHAT MAKES A PLACE

This epidemic of rootlessness makes the idea of place an important issue for Christians. In Genesis, God gave Adam and Eve a place, roots and a duty to gently care for that place as he commanded them. When they desecrated this place through sin, rootlessness entered the world as men and women struggled to find their place in a broken world. Placemaking, then, is essential to a Christian understanding of identity and home, where a person belongs. The notion that place is neither merely physical nor primarily an abstraction is also important. Instead, God instituted places for the good of people and the world.

There is a difference between a house and a home. Home, however, can carry many connotations, some less than pleasant. Walsh and Bouma-Prediger explain this in *Beyond Homelessness*, pointing out that houses are mere structures, walls and floors with ceilings and doors. A home, in contrast, is an abode. The word “abode” is the archaic past form of the word “abide,” which describes a kind of home-making, a persistent choice of dwelling: “A house is a space of residence, while a home is a place of (in)dwelling. ... A

¹¹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 3-4.

¹² Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 291.

house becomes a home when it is transformed by memory-shaped meaning into a place of identity, connectedness, order, and care.”¹³ Home is also a place of permanence, a storied place, a refuge, a place of hospitality, a place of “embodied habitation,” a place of orientation, and a place of affiliation and belonging.¹⁴ These words describe the ideal, yet homes can be places of brokenness, too.

Some stiffen at the thought of home, since for them it is an embattled place, where peace and rest are illusive or scarce. The idea of home shapes individuals profoundly, for better or worse. A perfect home does not exist in this world, but many agree there are basic principles that influence settled, rhythmic, and quieter lives like those of Ruthie Leming and her community.

ATTRIBUTES OF PLACEMAKING

At their best, places are permanent, resilient refuges from the world. The Christian’s calling to make a place, as seen from the beginning in Genesis with Adam and Eve, is now complicated by the transient nature of life, both in an urbanized culture and a sojourning community of the Church. In *Where All Mortals Dwell*, Bartholomew offers several attributes of placemaking that help inform a Christian’s worldview as they invest their lives in the dwellings, cities, and relationships that fill their everyday lives. These attributes include attentiveness, familiarity, silence, slowness, stability, repetition, particularity, hope, respect, and love, as well as engagement with God, ourselves, and others.¹⁵ Wendell Berry often echoes these attributes, encouraging his readers to find rest in the stillness of nature, where everything works as intended. Berry elaborates on this theme in his poem, “The Peace of the Wild Things”:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

13 Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 57-58.

14 Ibid.

15 Bartholomew, *Where All Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*, 320.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.¹⁶

In this poem, Berry encourages his readers to remember the “wild things” and live in peace instead of constant mobility that often feels like chaos. People worry about their careers and children; about their aging parents, and about stock market crashes; about fresh tragedies and those still to come. Berry reminds himself of the rhythms of nature, which live and flow as they should: in grace and elegance that humans forgo for busier schedules and fuller bank accounts. But words like “stillness,” “silence,” and “stability” do not often characterize modern life; “chaotic,” “unstable,” and “frustrating” seem closer to the mark for most of us. This is partly due to busyness, a hyperactivity that arises not out of necessity but out of fear. We fear silence and attentiveness to our own souls because silence confronts us with ourselves—our insecurities, struggles, and even our unfulfilled hopes and dreams. But silence and stillness, along with these other qualities are what a Christian theology of place should try to recapture in the face of a transient and hostile world. In *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America*, Wilfred M. McClay discusses the need for stability and rest in a frantic world. He describes how

in a frenetically mobile and ever more porous and inexorably globalizing world, we stand powerfully in need of such stable and coherent places in our lives—to ground us and orient us, and mark off a finite arena, rich with memory, for our activity as parents and children, as friends and neighbors, and as free and productive citizens.¹⁷

16 David Kern, “Wendell Berry Loves Your Nowhere Place,” *Christ and Pop Culture*. Accessed August 13, 2016. http://christandpopculture.com/wendell-berry-loves-nowhereplace/?utm_content=bufferb-575d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

17 Ted McAllister and Wilfred M. McClay, *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America* (New York: New Atlantic Books, 2014), 3.

In order to live healthy lives, humans need stability and the freedom to slow down and settle into a life that may never be praised by Wall Street, but is beneficial for the soul. One of the ways people can do this is by engaging—that is, communing—fully with God, themselves, and others.

COMMUNION WITH GOD, OURSELVES, AND OTHERS

Before a person can rightly interact with and understand concepts of home, place, and rest, he must come to terms with the sovereign God who rules over all the people and places in his life. God created the world as a habitat for thriving and building; even the rhythm of its spinning sustains life and glorifies its maker. In Romans, Paul tells his readers that many have gone astray, chasing after sin, even though they possess the knowledge of God in their hearts (Romans 1:22-25). Berry expresses the consequences of this waywardness well, declaring that “in the circle of the human we are weary with striving, and are without rest.”¹⁸ This unfulfilled longing points to a deeper need for the eternity God has placed in people’s hearts, though they cannot attain it yet (Ecc 3:11). This longing is for something that lasts longer than a fleeting moment, yet eternity is something people cannot know apart from God (Eph 2:8-10). Communion with God will therefore begin with a humble acknowledgement that he is God and there is no other God besides him. One must recognize he is good, forgiving, steadfast in love, and just in his declarations of sin and righteousness.

True communion with God then leads to true engagement with a person’s own soul. In the Psalms, David and other writers consistently remind themselves to look to God who is righteous, gracious, and merciful. In Psalm 116:5-7 David writes “Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.” The Psalmists are always reminding their souls to remember God’s faithfulness and rejoice. This purposeful rest and remembering brings Christians to a point of healthy engagement with their own souls. Communion with the Lord reminds the frail soul that God sits enthroned over the earth, therefore they can “cease striving” and know he is God (Psalm 46:10,

18 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 12.

NASB). These verses exhort someone to be still in the peace Christ gives his followers. Christians engage with themselves well when they accept that humanity is limited, frail, and in need of grace on a moment-by-moment basis. Engagement with self thus includes the experience of true rest, an understanding of personal limits, and adequate care for soul and body.

Healthy places are made by healthy people, and setting aside enough time to find rest for the soul is essential to engagement with God and others. Engagement with others is often more difficult because it is not just ourselves, as Christians are called to love each other as God has loved them (John 13:34-35). The church is the primary setting in which Christians are called to love others, living in harmony with the body of Christ. Engaging with others is necessary for a healthy relationship with God and a healthy soul. Berry notes this need for community outside ourselves in his book, *The Art of Commonplace*, claiming that “[O]ur sense of wholeness is not just the sense of completeness in ourselves, but also is the sense of belonging to others and to our place; it is an unconscious awareness of community, of having in common.”¹⁹ The Christian community provides people with this sense of belonging when they treat each other with dignity, as fellow image-bearers of God. Communion in these areas—with God, ourselves, and others—are key characteristics for Christian placemaking. When believers implement these into their lives, places will begin to heal souls as refuges of solitude and stability for the weary world around them.

MAKING A PLACE AS SOJOURNERS IN A GROANING WORLD

When Adam and Eve displaced themselves from Eden, they began to sojourn throughout the world, roaming from place to place. The Israelites sojourned for forty years, longing for a home. Jesus left heaven, making himself at home in the world for a brief time, commissioning his followers to follow in his footsteps (Matt 28:18-20). Christians are called to make places while also living as sojourners in a foreign land. While Christians sojourn, they must invite the world into their places, reflecting God as they long for Heaven. This reflection occurs in everyday life, “through acts of imagination, ordering,

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *The Art of Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 144.

planning, building and so on, all humans may participate in the hopeful renewal of our creation. ... God's presence can be found in arenas of local human placemaking, and that is this very *locality* that speaks to the abiding presence of God in *all* the world."²⁰

Christians participate in this redemption when they make places of solitude and rest, but also recognizing life's impermanence. They do this through working faithfully in whatever arena God sovereignly ordains for them, including the local church. The church is the best example of a place on earth for Christians, which God instituted for his glory and the good of his people. Through the body of fellow Christians, the Holy Spirit and Christ's work on behalf of his people can satisfy the longings arising from this rootlessness in the world. Bartholomew emphasizes this, stating that "Implacement ultimately means that by the Spirit we have the Father and the Son as our co-inhabitants. Such at-homeness is the key to being at home in our particular places in God's good but fallen world."²¹ This communion with God through the church gives Christians "the vision and resources for birthing Christ again and again in this world."²² This is the call of Christians in the world: to make a place while also sojourning through life as strangers, knowing the future of the church in Heaven awaits those who remain in Christ. One day God will renew all things.

CONCLUSION

Though home is often a place of brokenness, there is hope of redemption. Right now, many places are plagued by sorrow, sin, and displaced affections. This brokenness points people to their deepest need, a need for salvation. One day a perfect Christ will make a perfect place for his people. This is the hope to which Christians cling, in life and death, in homelessness and rootedness. Amid sickness, grief, and the groaning of creation, Christ will one day redeem the brokenness, gather the homeless, and create an eternally glorious place for his people. Until then, Christians live as wayfaring strangers. As they sojourn, it is important to remember that

20 Craft, "Making a Place on Earth," 118.

21 Bartholomew, *Where All Mortals Dwell*, 320.

22 *Ibid.*

At the heart of the Christian gospel is the message that we are all homeless, but that there is a home in which our yearning hearts can and will find rest. That home is creation redeemed and transfigured, a place of grace that is inhabited by an indwelling God of unfathomable love. The Christian gospel, in other words, is a grand story of redemptive homecoming that is at the same time grateful homemaking.²³

This promise of a restored and perfect home motivates Christians who are making places, longing for places, or wandering from places in this world to press in and press on to the end. Jesus encourages his disciples, saying “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). As Christians yearn for this redeemed place, they can remember that earthly homes are mere shadows meant to point them to the eternal reality of Heaven. Even communities like Starhill, Louisiana, with its deep roots and generous souls that cared for Ruthie Leming, cannot compare to what is to come. These shadows give Christians a glimpse into the greater, future reality of this gracious and long-awaited homecoming.

²³ Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 320.

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