

Homesick: John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-21

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

When I was attending a university in Germany, I lived alone and did research in the university library. Occasionally, I was aware of that peculiar kind of loneliness called homesickness. On those days, I found solace listening to a street performer named Terry. Terry was homeless, and he spent his afternoons on an old stone bridge near the university. I would often listen to him play American folk songs and feel a nostalgic pull toward home. Even though his voice sounded as if he had just gargled a handful of gravel, Terry knew how to work a crowd. He would begin with upbeat songs, grinning his toothless smile as he sang with enthusiasm. Then, he would slow the pace of his repertoire and become more introspective. Terry always ended with his signature piece—Bob Dylan’s classic, “Like a Rolling Stone.” As he sang about living in the world with no place to call home, his audience stilled. It seemed irreverent to pass him by or even to toss change into his guitar case. We knew instinctively that with this song Terry was singing not for us but for himself.

And yet he was singing about all of us. Every person on that bridge in Bonn was—in a spiritual sense—homesick. Germans have a beautiful word for this vague feeling of dis-ease in the soul. They call it *Sehnsucht*—a word that suggests we are seeking union with something from which we are now separated. According to the Bible, *Sehnsucht* is a universal condition. It is the dislocation of our hearts from the heart of God. This is one of the most persistent themes in the Hebrew scriptures. The psalmist speaks both of a pining to “dwell in the house of the Lord” and of a longing to see God’s face (Ps. 27:4, 8). The prophet Jeremiah describes our perpetual dissatisfaction as lasting as long as our yearning—our desperate search for God—remains unfulfilled. We are, he says, like “cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13).

The psalmist and Jeremiah suggest that no matter what we obtain or what we achieve, we remain unsatisfied. This is the human experience. Vaguely aware of the void inside us, we feel depleted and displaced, and long for a deeper connection. In Walker Percy’s novel *The Gramercy Winner*, Will Grey confides in his psychologist, Dr. Scanlon:

“What’s the matter, Willy?”

“I don’t know, Scanlon. I’m homesick.”

“How long have you been homesick?”

“All my life.”

When Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, approached Jesus with the plaintive appeal, “Show us the Father and [then] we will be satisfied,” he spoke for all of us. And when Jesus patiently explained God’s response to this our deepest longing, he was addressing each one of us. He spoke of his life—the incarnation—as part of a divine invitation into the very heart of God. “Have I been with you all this time,” Jesus asks both Philip and us, “and still you do not know me?” “Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14: 8-18).

Hildegard of Bingen may have had these words in mind when she wrote, “God’s Son became human in order that humans would have a home in God.” This is the purpose of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It reaches its culmination on the Day of Pentecost when the Father sends the Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

When this day arrives, scripture does not mention Philip, but we can assume that he is there. He is with the rest of the disciples in Jerusalem ten days after the ascension of Christ. Their risen Lord has left them. The disciples must have felt orphaned on that day, acutely aware of their homesickness for God. And on that day “ a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . filled the entire house where they were sitting. . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2: 2-4).

They were *filled*. There was no longer a void inside of them. Homesickness no longer ruled their hearts. We sense this change in how the disciples began to see themselves. After Pentecost, they referred to themselves as the people of the Way (Acts 9:2)—sojourners in this world, but not orphans. The promise Jesus made to Philip and to us has been fulfilled. We are now in God, and God is in us. In the midst of our desperate search for God, the Father comes to us and cultivates a home wherever we are.

In March, a boy scout from my parents’ church became separated from his troop. As prayer vigils gathered and search parties combed the forest, he wandered alone for nearly three days in the North Carolina mountains. The morning he was discovered—disoriented, yet unharmed—CNN was on hand to share the happy news

with the world. An interviewer asked the boy's father how his young son came to be lost. He explained that the boy had left the scout campsite voluntarily and was trying to find the nearest highway so he could hitchhike back to Greensboro. "And why was he doing that?" the reporter wanted to know. "He was homesick," his father replied.

Our Father knows our deepest longing and that when we lose our way, it is a misdirected attempt to satisfy our homesickness. God does not leave us alone in our searching. God does not wait for us to find our way back. The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit—perhaps something akin to a divine search party. And part of the message of Pentecost is this: God comes to us. God finds us where we are, and then that place—wherever it happens to be—begins to feel like home.