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John asked the question during our Sunday morning "Dialogue with the Word" session where 20 of us gather to reflect on the Scripture readings of the day: "Am I being a Christian by being a nice guy?"

Mike and Mary Jo immediately followed with an experience: Is our work in Malawi providing water-well development through our Rotary Club commitment simultaneously following Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? Other folks chimed in; it was another lively discussion among diversified but faith-filled people.

That Sunday morning sharing did what it often does: It planted a seed in me that is still growing. John's question, and Mike and Mary Jo's lived experience, reopened the door to the familiar dilemma of the interaction between human nature and grace, and the corresponding allegory of the three homes.

When I was 8 years old, we moved to 122 North 14th Street in Belleville, Illinois. It was larger than our previous home, with more room for me, my brother, three sisters and parents, but it was an older house with a basement, main floor, and the kids' two bedrooms upstairs. The basement housed the big coal furnace, coal bin, laundry room, Dad's small workbench, and a lot of darkness. It's where he shoveled coal into the furnace, cleaned fish, and found replacement screws. Mom washed our dirty laundry down there on Monday mornings. There was no natural light except for a small basement window that also became the shoot for delivering the coal.

For a kid, the basement was a scary place. Dark even with a dim light on, damp, coal dust permanently anchored in the air, black walls that hid frightening ghosts, and low cave-like ceilings. When my dad said, "Tom, run downstairs and get my hammer," the operative word was "run."

The main floor and the upstairs bedrooms were standard with a few windows, lots of flowered wallpaper, a kitchen where we ate, a living room where we listened to Cardinals games and the Friday night fights on a large console radio, and, in the back, my parents' bedroom where either my sister or I (we still disagree) broke my mom's big mirror. The windows allowed sunlight to warm the house, counteract the basement shadows, inspire laughter, cook and eat with joy, and welcome relatives and friends.

The sunlight was like grace that kept the dark side of our human nature in the scary basement.

When I was 16, and my brother and two sisters were married, my parents moved again, this time to a smaller but newer home with a larger yard, a flowering mimosa tree in front, some apple trees in the back and enough space to play extended family whiffle ball games. This house also has a basement, main floor, and a livable attic converted into a bedroom that I used during summer vacations from school.

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The basement has a gas furnace so all of the coal residue vanished along with the other scary kid stuff, and included a pingpong table that, when covered, made a delightful Thanksgiving dinner table for extended family. My niece now owns that home and transformed that basement into a delightful den. It still has small basement windows but there are more of them and the indoor lighting brightens up the whole area.

The main floor also has more windows, and therefore more natural sunlight and the home furnishings are comfortable and delicately arranged, creating a very pleasant setting.

There appears to be more grace flowing into the home and the human nature in the basement has an obvious good side to it.

The home I would like to live in has no basement. There are floor-to-ceiling, slightly tinted, glare-proof picture windows throughout most of the common areas: the living room, kitchen, eating space, study and den. The natural light and view brings much of the outdoors into the home. Solar panels on the roof turn the graceful sunlight into useable energy that provides power throughout the home.

There is no second floor either. It is a modern ranch-style home, and everything is just a small hallway away. This home is not very big but, with the high ceilings, it feels more spacious than it is. The common areas face the setting sun, which ushers in daily variations of gently easing into the night.

This home invites human nature to mix naturally and seamlessly with God-produced, ever present grace. It is hard to separate the natural from the grace, even if I

wanted to. And John, Mike and Mary Jo also have sunlit, grace-filled homes. I still have dirty laundry, the dishes need washing, and the rooms need cleaning but living in this home destroys the artificial boundaries we make between natural, supernatural and grace.

It all raises a third question: Which home do I really live in?

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