

Homecoming

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 8, 2012.
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 6:1-13.*

Going home ought to be easy. It is where our people are, the place from which we have come, the air in which we were formed and shaped to become whoever it is we have become or are becoming. And, yet, images of homecoming for most of us, though deep, are also often complicated. I remember attending something literally called "homecoming" as a child, an annual event at Marvin Hill Methodist Church deep in the red hills of rural northeast Mississippi. We were town people—thank you very much—but each summer whether we wanted to or not—and as we got older, we most often wanted not—we'd make the trek to the country church where my grandfather served for many years as minister to participate in a phenomenon known as "homecoming."

I remember mostly the food and the heat. Even as a little kid, I loved to eat and hated to be hot. Some things are strangely unchanged. We would sit under big oak trees and have dinner-on-the-grounds, which, of course, was not really on the ground but on long tables laden with copious amounts of fabulous food. Not one dish was low fat, butter being the first if not main ingredient of each entree; yet the people there seemed to live a long time. They certainly all looked to me as though they had been living a very long time.

By my college years, the homecomings were a little less idyllic and more likely to be resisted. To my parents' eternal credit, they dealt with these years with considerable grace. I fear I was terribly obnoxious, so proud of everything I no longer held to be sacred; it never occurred to me to keep these thoughts to myself. Even when my hair was a spectacle, when my diet was macro-biotic, and when every sentence ended with a protest chant, they would drag me down to Marvin Hill Methodist Church and act like they weren't just mortified.

Robert Frost famously wrote that "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." And he was right. They took me in as long as I would go back; but what he failed to mention is that they don't have to particularly like you anymore, and that when you leave again, they are really delighted to say goodbye.

Because there is rarely anything radically new about human dynamics, Jesus in his day got more than a little acquainted with this truth about life. Mark's gospel, the most unadorned and for me particularly honest of the narratives, admits earlier in Chapter 3 that Jesus' family entertained the notion that this beloved son and brother might have gone off the deep end. Every family knows that there is nothing worse than a religious fanatic. They went so far as to actually try to restrain him at one point. Matthew and Luke, written a bit later and with an eye toward making sure that Jesus' divinity was carefully proclaimed, omitted this detail. But the synoptic narratives clearly agree that Jesus did not fare too well in his hometown, leaving him to state his well-known conclusion, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

There is a lifetime of learning to be derived from this story; but having considerably less time than that, I offer three brief points for your consideration. First, note that Jesus was not trying to convert his family. He was teaching in the synagogue, not around the table at Thanksgiving. Whether they still thought he was crazy or had come around, Jesus knew better than to take them on. My experience of us, who are not Jesus, is that we have much less wisdom around this issue. Though my lovely sister—and she really is lovely—and I are unquestionably related (all evidence points to it), in fact we are not residents of the same planet—certainly not with regard to politics or religion. Our best efforts to effect change in one another have been dismal and unpleasant failures. Over time we have come to understand that some things are best just left alone—that we should, as we say down South, "leave 'em lay where Jesus flung 'em." Though I have no idea what that really means, I love the way it sounds; and truthfully, it has become the basis of family peace—particularly when coupled with about a thousand miles.

My second point, though, is that when we fail to see one as he/she truly is—even a family member—we do so at great risk, for it may mean that we miss something crucial. Kierkegaard tells a story about a circus coming to a little village out in the country. The townspeople watched with much enthusiasm as the great tent went up on a nearby hill. Just before the circus was to open, a fire started in part of the little village, a section that was more visible to the circus people than to the villagers. Already dressed for the opening, the clown raced into the village to warn the people. Agitated and alarmed, he ran from person to person telling them of the danger. But because he looked like a clown and because everyone knows that clowns clown around, the villagers refused to take him seriously until it was too late. It was not a happy ending.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, he was stunned by the citizens' inability to see him for who he truly was. They knew him as a carpenter, a native boy, son of Mary and Joseph. What could truly be expected of him? "Who does he think he is?" they wondered. The impact upon Jesus was mighty. Our gospel says, "He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." The oldest version of Mark's gospel, simply and arguably more truthfully, ends with these words, "He could do *no* deed of power there." Clinched eyes and closed hearts can stop a wonderful act in its tracks. The moments I have missed because my eyes were trained to see only the expected are more numerous than I want to admit. And like most of us, I too know what it feels like to be disempowered by being seen through eyes that could only see me as I once was.

For my final point, I am reminded of an even deeper truth for me about life and homecoming. It is the claim immortalized in Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again*. Despite our almost primal urge to try it, in the end we learn the truth as Wolfe's protagonist, George Webber, learns, "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood . . . back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame . . . back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory," he said. Wolfe was right.

We know only the business part of Jesus' return to Nazareth, the preaching in the synagogue, but it is not hard for me to imagine that Jesus would have had feelings similar to ours, some latent hope for something that only could be found at home in Nazareth. I am speaking of what I believe is the existential desire shared by all of us to find home. I think I have been looking for it my whole life. The most natural thing for any of us is to assume that "finding home" means to "return home." It is only as we get older that we truly realize that returning home is much different from *going* home. Sometimes there are geographical aspects to this difference. In Willie Morris's memoir *North Toward Home*, the former editor of *Harper's* writes lovingly and longingly of his upbringing in Mississippi, even as eventually he comes to understand that it was heading North that actually led him "home." And though he returned to Mississippi at the end of his too-short life, it was always "the North" that somehow was profoundly home to him. Many of us at various levels of expatriation understand this.

Home—all of us want it, need it, long for it. Beyond physical place, the essential homecoming we so deeply desire is coming home to God, not in the final sense of life after death—we leave that to God—but in the sense of going to that space *now*, usually within us, where we know that we are loved and accepted by God. It is hard to stay there—at home—because much of what we hear tells us that home with God is too good to be true or just something we make up. But it is not: It is the truth, and it is where God wants us to be. The voice whispers sweetly, "come home; come home now."

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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