

Genesis 32:3-8, 33:1-4
2 Corinthians 5:16-20

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 21, 2009; Father's Day

GOING HOME

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. *2 Corinthians 5:18*

This is the season known as Ordinary Time, when the Church journeys through a long pilgrimage of some 30 to 35 numbered Sundays between Easter and Advent. No great festivals of the church, such as Christmas and Easter, punctuate the church year in these weeks, so they are simply named by numbers or *ordinals* (from the Latin), hence "ordinary" Sundays. This is not to say they are insignificant. On the contrary, the ordinary or commonplace is where we live most of our days. It is where God calls us to the uncommon yet demanding task of making the commonplace a thing of beauty. It's a season to become faithful with many things, especially the hard things that have been set aside, to get us closer home to God who made us, and closer to those whom God has made us to be with. In the language of the Church, it is a season for going home.

Homecomings, reconciliations with familiar people and places can be beautiful times; times touched with joy and spontaneity and all manner of good things. But our experience also tells us that they may not be without their pain and ambiguity. The Bible talks a good bit about home comings.

- Recall the parable of the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel, a homecoming that was not devoid of pain or awkwardness, even some bitterness on the part of the older brother, with whom he would now have to share the same roof.
- Remember, too, Joseph's reunion with his brothers in Egypt, far from their native soil, and the wrenching scene where Joseph, now the prime minister of all Egypt, retreats to an ante-room, unable at first to compose his seething emotions toward his brothers who had treated him so wretchedly twenty years before. Yet once he overcame himself, never were they more close.
- And recall Jacob and Esau also reunited after twenty years of separation, and with much anxiety on Jacob's part for his stealing the blessing and the birthright from his older brother Esau. Esau races toward him followed by four hundred armed men, only to hurl himself on the neck of his brother to embrace and kiss him.
- Remember, too, Paul and the Apostles, meeting for the first time in Jerusalem after 14 years. Paul, who had formerly been the arch-persecutor of Christians, often unto death; home, but with a long journey of the heart still to travel before they were at home with each other, so deep lay the resentments, even among the Apostles.

Homecoming is more than a journey back to familiar surroundings. It can be as much a journey of the heart as of the feet, and often more so. There probably isn't a family here that hasn't suffered through the anguish of an immense distance from a loved one, even while living under the same roof. As the saying goes: "All God's children walk with a limp." And we all have a long way to go to get home.

Jesus has no other purpose than to finally lead us home, and home, finally, is where the peace of God is. This, then, is a very personal message about going home.

My own journey home really began in 1972, out at sea on the cruise ship QE2 heading back to Norfolk, Virginia. Jane, whom I had met on the voyage, had an obvious faith in Jesus Christ that arrested

something deep within me. Hers was not a flamboyant witness, or a demanding or insistent witness. It was an exemplary witness. I had had no involvement in the Church for ten years at that time. Oh, I had been involved in the Church as a child, had grown up in the Church, but no one had ever encouraged me to make a life commitment to Christ. No one had ever invited me, that is, until then.

Three weeks later, at home in the privacy of my parents home in England, at one in the morning when my parents and all the world about me was lost in sleep, I made that commitment. I started that journey home.

There is a homesickness in all of us. A longing for more than just a familiar place with a sound roof. Home is where the restless yearning of the heart ends, and I had one particular stop to make that couldn't be bypassed. It would occur a long way from the old home place in Walmer Bridge in North West England. We were living in New Jersey. Jane and I and our then few months-old Carolyn were living in Princeton where I was on my pilgrimage through seminary. My parents had come over from England on their first visit in five years, since the wedding.

My father was in frail health but eager to see the Yankees play baseball. He loved sports and was fascinated by baseball, though nothing was about to dislodge his affection for cricket. So we eased his arthritic body into our old '65 Dodge Polara and sped up the New Jersey Turnpike to the George Washington Bridge where, as is customary, we sat for an hour and twenty minutes in the middle of the bridge in a traffic jam (just as I did 5 weeks ago!). After about an hour, sitting two hundred feet above the sluggish gray mass of the Hudson River, he asked me, "Son, is this what they call grid-iron?"

I smiled and said, "No, Dad, this is grid lock."

They were in the bottom of the second inning by the time we found our seats above first base in the old Yankee Stadium. The Yankees were playing the California Angels that night and it was turning out to be a regular slugfest. As I recall, the Angels went on to win it 11-4. There were about five home runs that night and any number of those long fly balls that brought the whole crowd spontaneously to its feet. Everybody, that is, except my poor Dad. By the time he could wrench his arthritic body to his feet the play would be over, lost in a sea of standing people. Then they would gradually sit down and he would lower himself back into his seat again. Every time he would try to make it to his feet, and every time it was too late.

When the crowd finally stood on cue again in the middle of the seventh inning he grabbed for his cane and the arm rest and started to wrestle his indignant body to his feet again. "Is it another home run?" he asked.

"No, Dad," I said, "just a bit of tradition."

I could have cried with frustration for him. I know he enjoyed the hot dogs and the drinks, and felt the electric mood of the stadium. But I felt as though the evening, like our own relationship for thirty-three years, had been caught in its own sort of gridlock: the bridge; the frantic search for parking; my concern at leaving him, leaning on his cane, wide eyed with wonder outside the teeming stadium while, for twenty minutes, I looked for a space for the car; the shifting, anonymous crowd that both made the evening and took it away.

After the game we drove back down the Garden State Parkway in near silence, swept along by a steady stream of traffic oozing out of the Big Apple. In all my then thirty odd years we had seldom been closer to each other than a handshake, he and I. It was as much a stifling cultural thing as anything else that had inhibited us. We'd certainly had a better relationship after I had gone into the Royal Air Force when I was about sixteen, and had been billeted in the same barracks room that he had occupied about twenty five years before when he was training to be a flight engineer during World War II. It was a rare piece of common ground, that barracks. It gave us a common focus; sort of drew us together when I would come home on leave.

Now, in this unlikely setting, on a dark highway in a foreign land, it was time to say it. It was long past time, but that was another story, all bound up in cultural inhibitions and failed opportunities. So, I remember, I fixed my eyes on the white line snaking down by the side of the road like a lifeline.

"I love you, Dad," I said. It was really all I was able to say.

After I said that there was what seemed like a terrible pause. The sort that comes heavy with fear when you dropped something in some illicit hiding as a child, and you waited, trembling, to be discovered.

What he said, I realized, took as much courage as this quietly very courageous man had shown in a lifetime of courage and private anguish. Virtually abandoned by his authoritarian father, a British Army Major, after his mother also abandoned him when he was two. A prisoner of war after his Lancaster bomber was crippled in a mid-air collision over Germany. On barely making it across a frozen river, he landed in a snow bank. Two nights later he was captured by local farmers who immediately set about lynching him, likely because of the recent terrible fire bombing of Dresden, just twenty-five miles away, that killed 35,000 people in one night. But with the rope around his neck and over a limb, they were stopped at the last instant by a nighttime policeman riding by on his bike. Soon after his capture he was paraded on stage in a music hall, an example of those “stupid English airmen.” After the war he spent thirty years as a policeman, eventually in the mounted police branch. Yet he was unable to get a promotion for thirty years, for whatever reason. And after his mandatory retirement there were ten years of menial clerking jobs; jobs that angered the family because he was worth so much more, yet which debasement he simply would never allow to cripple his integrity as a man, always on time, always a full day’s work, and more. Thirty years of debilitating, even depersonalizing illness, the outcome of imprisonment and harsh treatment in the war, yet which he bore with a private courage and always with a stolid dignity. This man was my father.

Finally, he broke the silence and for the first time, said, “I love you, son.”

And I knew what it felt like to come home.

Two years later we made our first trip back to the UK in eight years. As our train pulled into Preston Station, I saw a few family members spread out along the bleak platform. As we scrambled off in a frenzy of hauled luggage, nervous chatter and quick embraces, I saw an old man half staggering in his urgency between two canes, willing his infirm body down the platform toward us. And when he got close enough to me he let both canes go and we simply clung to each other. It was the perfect moment of communion, of reconciliation through wordless thanksgiving.

Four years later, only about a week before he died, we sealed our homecoming, he and I. I had hurriedly packed for the emergency trip back to England, and on a last second impulse grabbed my communion set from the office and took it with me. Then I discovered that I had no U.S. passport. I had just become a U.S. citizen two months before. That was resolved by the local congressman. Then I was at his bedside with the family, watched as he struggled, half in half out of consciousness to recognize me and the pictures of the family that I had brought with me. He had never seen Katherine and Carolyn had changed a lot. And for the only time, when he saw Katherine’s picture his eyes brightened and his whole countenance changed.

I think it was about the fifth day that we took communion together, my mother, my eldest brother, my father and me, in his hospital room. Because he couldn’t eat or drink, I took the tiniest crumb of bread and placed it to his tongue. I realized as I took that crumb what a miracle of divine presence the sacrament was, and how much that morsel of bread might do for him, just as it did on a hillside centuries ago. Then I dipped the corner of a Kleenex in a cup and touched it to his lips. “Do this in remembrance of me,” said Jesus.

We were never closer, all of us, than in that moment. Never more home. “You’re going to be home soon, Dad,” I said, “your real home.” Then I tried to smile, and said, “Save me a good seat in left field.”

Three days later I returned to America, and he did indeed go home.

We all have journeys to make, often long delayed. If you need to speak your heart to someone, if you need to build a bridge, or heal a wound too long left raw and painful from neglect. I hope you’ll reach out, soon. Amen.