

Going Home  
 Luke 4:21-30  
 July 4, 2021

Perhaps Thomas Wolfe said it best -- “You can’t go home again.” These words are known to many, and resonate with the gospel story we heard today. Some people do attempt to go back to roots or the place we grew up at some time or another, with mixed results. Going home has its’ perils – as Jesus found out, but he did it anyway.

Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, life long resident of Nazareth, had a homecoming of sorts. He returned to his hometown and preached in the synagogue, and the people were amazed.

“Isn’t that the carpenter’s kid? We know him. Pretty amazing things he’s saying, wouldn’t you say? Who would ever have thought he would turn out like this?” One minute they were all duly impressed with his learning and his performance in the synagogue, and a few minutes later they were ready to throw him off a cliff in their rage at his message to them.

Was it something he said? For the people who lived in Jesus' home town, their knowledge of him as a youth prevented them from seeing God's power in him as an adult. We don’t know all the reasons why the Nazarenes treated Jesus the way they did.

Maybe people don’t like it when one of their own succeeds at something. “She forgot where she came from,” or “He got too big for his britches.” It is a story that many of us can identify with because it is a story that plays out time and again. Too much familiarity apparently *can* breed contempt.

Yet I’m reminded of another old saying about home -- the famous line from Robert Frost, who said, “Home is that place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” Well, I suppose there could be some in-laws you wouldn’t want to take in, but that’s the exception! Apparently there was no room for Jesus. Most of the people living in Nazareth didn’t care to take him in or receive Jesus at all, as they surged forward to throw him over the cliff, but we’re told he escaped and left town

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When most of us think of our “home,” we think of safety, warmth, a place of rest and renewal, a place of belonging and nurture. For many people the image of “home” is rooted deep in childhood memories. Often there is a particular house or neighborhood and a particular set of people associated with those memories. The adage about not being able to go home again is born of the reality that all of us experience as we grow up and move away. We go off on our own, and there is no going back to what once was home.

Over time, “home” becomes something that is reconstituted in new places, with new faces and new experiences. Jesus’ homecoming at the synagogue in Nazareth didn’t go well. At first, the folks back home are proud of him, glad to see him, and excited at what and who he has become. Then they become less enamored of him as they realize the extent to which he has changed, grown, and learned things that he did not learn at home, things they find hard to accept, truths that they have ignored or maybe had never known, like hanging out with Samaritans, sinners, and other unsavory types.

Jesus broadened his horizons and experienced God in new ways, and they were not so sure they wanted to hear about those experiences. Leaving home means coming into contact with foreigners, folks not like us, who can transform our understanding and open up new vistas. It can upset the status quo. It can also mean coming of age for the one who leaves and tries to return.

The story of Jesus’ call to leave home points to something that lies at the heart of the human spiritual quest. As young adults, we lived our lives balancing our need for the comfort and familiarity of home, but also feeling a pull toward independence, and to move forward into the future that God had in store.

Once Jesus left his father’s carpentry shop and became a prophet, it was very hard to find a place to call home – anywhere. He was an itinerate preacher, always on the go. He said, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Luke 9:58

Surely he also meant not just a physical home, but a place where his teachings would be accepted, for he often met with hostility, particularly among the religious leaders. Jesus and most of the Old Testament prophets were called to speak the truth in love, which often caused them to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Afflicting the comfortable in the name of God is thankless work, as the prophets soon found out.

Things haven’t changed much over these 2000 plus years. Prophets are still not welcomed in their hometowns or even their own countries. Nelson Mandella, for one, comes to mind. Gandhi was another. These are voices that attempted to criticize others in power. Voices that speak up for freedom, for the marginalized and oppressed are still silenced by the powers-that-be all over the world. Just look at the Republic of Balarus today.

God’s love and mercy knows no boundaries. This is radical stuff. You can’t go home again. Not even Jesus. Of course home is not just a physical place, but a mythological journey towards wholeness and meaning -- an effort to be “at home” in the world.

Leaving home means the end of naiveté. Just ask Adam and Eve! They were banished from the idyllic Garden of Eden, and life would never be the same, though no doubt they longed to return.

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A number of years ago, our family went back to the little town in WV where I grew up, to conduct a memorial service for my elderly aunt. After the service, I decided to show the family around the town. In retrospect, that wasn't a very good idea. The family bakery my parents owned was a shell of what it once was – and was now a hair and nail salon, of all things! No more smells of fresh baked bread ... no more piping hot donuts or cookies and cupcakes in the front window. The letters spelling out “Davis Bakery” were no longer on the building, but a weathered image of the letters pointed out where the name used to be.

The next stop would be the high school ... now a warehouse for the local paper mill ... the main employer left in this little town. A trip up the hill ... former grade school ... used to sit proudly at the top of Kenny House Hill. Finally, we made our way to the old homestead ... the house where I grew up ... shingles were falling off the roof ... some windows were broken, and others were boarded up. A couple cars in an open garage suggested someone still lived there. The backyard that used to serve as the neighborhood baseball diamond and football field now held scrap metal and weeds. It was a hard day. There was no going back. It was no longer a young man's playground that I remembered, memories now tinged with sadness.

But then we went to the little Presbyterian Church on the corner where I conducted the memorial service for my aunt. Some of the people were there that I had known as a child. They spoke fondly of my aunt; they told stories of where we grew up, and how they came to the family store. They even brought out a picture of me on the Sunday School basketball team fifty years ago, and the trophy we had won!

The constant theme that was still there was God's love, embodied in the people who continue to serve and care for others. Maybe you *can* go home again in ways that really matter. They still loved their church, and were doing all they could to make sure it would be there for the next generation.

You can't always go back home, but you can always go back to God. He'll be waiting. Home can be more of an existential spiritual reality than a physical place where we live. There is an ache in the human heart that can only be appeased when we experience union with God. We may travel far and wide in search of God, only to discover He/She has been within us all the while. For some that makes Him hard to find. It's funny. We thought we were looking for home. Maybe we were looking for God all the while, and He who is our “home” and solid ground was looking for us. As St. Augustine was fond of saying, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”

When you discover your True Self – and I mean “True” with a capital “T,” you will also find God inside looking out through you. I have just been reading Richard Rohr’s book, Immortal Diamond on that subject. God is closer than you think.

Jesus must have left Nazareth that day disappointed at how much the locals failed to comprehend, for they rejected not only him, but the kingdom of God. It’s not every day a local kid claims to be the Son of God!

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There is another sense in which I hope we can use the word “home” today on this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. I hope we can welcome the many immigrants and refugees who come to this country looking for a home and a new start. I hope we can be a place where children separated from their parents at the border can find a foster home and be reunited with their parents.

I hope those making the dangerous and desperate journey from Guatemala can find a home where they feel safe and secure here in our country. I hope there are churches like ours that can be a place where refugees can feel safe and cared for, and find a home away from home. We continue to be a spiritual home for gay and lesbian folks who have not felt at home in other churches. Sometimes it seems like everybody is just trying to find their way home.

These are some of the places Jesus would call home today, where there is hospitality and acceptance for all of God’s people. On this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, it’s hard to feel free until all are free, as we remember our forefathers and mothers, who came to this country in search of their freedom and a place to call home.

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Let me close with another story about home from Anne Lamott’s book, Traveling Mercies. She tells a story about how as a young girl she became lost in the city of San Francisco. She flagged down a policeman and told him of her plight. Before long, they were cruising the city streets, safe inside the police car, when all of a sudden, she hollered, “Stop!” She said, “Thank you officer. I’ll be getting out here. You see, that’s my church, and I can always find my way home from there.”

That’s how it is for Christians, and how it is, I suspect, for many of you who have called First Congregational Church your church home over the years. No wonder some people feel a bit “homesick” after they move away from here. I think we all felt a little homesick because we could not be here during the pandemic. So today on this first Sunday back in the building after nearly sixteen months, let me say, “Welcome home!” May you always feel at home, and may you always be a home for all of God’s people. Amen.

Luke 4:21-30

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

4:22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

4:23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

4:24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.

4:25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;

4:26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

4:27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

4:28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

4:29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

4:30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.