

Coming Home

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 16
Gospel Reading: Luke 9: 51-62.

Gospel Plow:

**Heard the voice of Jesus say
Come unto me, I am the way.
Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.**

**When my way gets dark as night,
Know the lord will be my light.
Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.**

Refrain:
**Hold on, Hold on
Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.**

**Got my hands on the gospel plow
Wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now
Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.**

**I don't know but I've been told
Streets of heaven are paved with gold.
Keep your hand on that plow, hold on.**

Refrain:
**Hold on, Hold on
Keep your hand on the plow, hold on.
(Repeat)**

Jesus, as we know, was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and at the same time by the Holy Spirit—which gave him his commission: “You are my own dear son, with whom I am well-pleased.” He went into the desert for 40 days to prepare and then, empowered by the spirit, he made quite a name for himself preaching and healing throughout Galilee. Following that, Luke tells us, “Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.” Luke doesn’t tell us how long Jesus had been away. In Luke’s retelling, it seems that little time has passed. But in the retellings in Matthew and Mark, much more, perhaps half his ministry, has happened in the meantime. In any case, as Luke states, “The news about him [had] spread through all that territory. He taught in the synagogues and was praised by everyone” (Lk 4:14).

Now he was coming home. Just for a visit, mind you. Given his lack of a job and his itinerate life-style, Mary and Joseph, now the empty-nesters, might have feared he was moving back in—like a child after college. Luke doesn’t tell us how long Jesus stayed—maybe it was for the weekend. Surely at least he was there long enough to catch up, and for Jesus to share with them what he had been saying to folks. Luke tells us that on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue, where he was asked to read from the Scriptures and then to discuss them. Apparently he made quite an impression, as Luke tells us, “They were all well impressed with him and marveled at the eloquent words that he spoke.”

“Coming home” ...what phrase could sound sweeter? It evokes all kinds of positive emotions: happiness, security, familiarity. And here he was, coming home as a success too. These are the feelings that I find evoked in the Psalm for this morning. While the Psalmist is not singing about home, it could well be about home. Listen once again:

Psalm 16:

1 Protect me, O God: I trust in you for safety.

2 I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord: all the good things I have come from you.”

3 How excellent are the Lord’s faithful people! My greatest pleasure is to be with them.

...

5 You, Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need: my future is in your hands.

6 How wonderful are your gifts to me; how good they are!

7 I praise the Lord, because he guides me, and in the night my conscience warns me.

8 I am always aware of the Lord’s presence; he is near and nothing can shake me.

9 And so I am thankful and glad, and I feel completely secure,

10 because you protect me from the power of death. I have served you faithfully, and you will not abandon me to the world of the dead.

11 You will show me the path that leads to life; your presence fills me with joy and brings me pleasure forever.

Isn’t this what we, as children, ideally wished for or even expected from our home and family? Surely Jesus had known these comforts of home.

But in no time, things went bad. Luke compresses into a paragraph what must have been much more, but he concludes (Lk 4: 28-30): “When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of town, and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff, but he walked through the middle of the crowd and went his way.” Wow! What went wrong?

In all three synoptic gospels, Jesus is quoted as saying some thing like: “A prophet is never welcomed in his hometown” (Lk 4: 24; cf. Mk 6: 4 & Mt 13: 57: “A prophet is respected everywhere except in his own home town *and by his relatives and his family*”). Jesus makes it sound like this was a general problem for prophets, but it sounds to me like the problem was with this particular prophet. Clearly he had struck a nerve somewhere. What could he have said to provoke such a strong negative reaction that they *dragged him out of town and meant to throw him over a cliff*? What happened during that visit home?

To get some insight into the situation, it may be helpful to recall what often does happen when a child comes home for a visit—from college, say. Usually things have changed. One big change in Jesus' case is that he now has found out that Joseph is not really his father! That sounds like a plot twist in a soap opera. But we don't know if that came up. Generally the change is in the person who left home. For that person may have left as a child and returned as an adult. In any case, the one coming home has had new experiences—through college, military service, work, or whatever. Perhaps the child has lost religious belief, or changed to very different religious beliefs. Perhaps the child has gained new interests and decided to major in something weird—like philosophy! Perhaps the child has gotten distracted with drugs or alcohol, or gotten a tattoo, or gotten pregnant, or married (or both, we hope!). Lots of things can change—and often do. He left as one person, and came home as another, as we say.

It is clear what has happened in this case—Jesus has gotten religion, a new kind that the hometown and family were not familiar with, and were not happy with. If this sounds surprising to you, let me remind you of some of the things Jesus preached—and, we can imagine, shared with his family and friends while home for the weekend:

Once, when Jesus was preaching to a crowd, his “mother and brothers came to him, but were unable to join him because of the crowd. Someone said to Jesus, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside and want to see you.’ Jesus said to them all, ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’” (Lk 8: 19-21). In the retelling by Mark it seems that his family is worried about him—perhaps they want to have him get some counseling—and his response is rather snippy: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers’ (Mk 3: 33). So Jesus disrespects his own family!

Another time, after getting a less-than-enthusiastic reception from the people in Samaria, Jesus has finally gotten a positive response in another village (this was our morning gospel reading): “As they went on their way, a man said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But that man said, “Sir, first let me go back and bury my father.” Jesus answered, “Let the dead bury their own dead. You go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.” Another man said, “I will follow you,

sir; but first let me go and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus said to him, “Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God.” (Lk 9: 57-61). Here Jesus seems to suggest that others need to disrespect their own families too—in clear contravention of the 5th Commandment: “Honor your father and mother” (Ex 20: 12; Deut 5: 16).

And then we have the real kicker. Another time when he was being followed by large crowds of people, Jesus turned to them and said: “Anyone who comes to me without hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes his own life too, cannot be my disciple.” (Lk 14: 26). In case you didn’t catch that, let me repeat it: “Anyone who comes to me without *hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters*, yes his own life too, cannot be my disciple.” And this wasn’t something he whispered to his inner circle of friends—he announced it to great crowds of people who were following him! Now some people have wanted to quibble about the meaning or translation of “hate” here, claiming he couldn’t really mean it. You will find some Bibles that translate it differently. For example, the Good News Bible has: “Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than he loves his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and his sisters, and himself as well.” And the Message Bible has: “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple.” But both of those Bibles admit to being contemporary presentations rather than literal translations, and no one really wants Jesus to say that. But he did! And I think we have to hear that to be able to understand the anger that he provoked upon coming home.

So I think we need to imagine Jesus’ visit home to Nazareth as a complete disaster. He managed to alienate and deeply anger everyone. And so they ran him out of town on a rail, as we say. You can almost hear Joseph saying, “Son, if that’s the way you feel, then you can just get the hell out of here!” And after he was gone, you can imagine Joseph and Mary wondering, “Where did we go wrong?”

It is deeply ironic that Christians are often known as advocates of so-called “family values.” Because Jesus preached just about the opposite of family values. And you can well imagine that his family would have taken offense.

Luke does relate some things that Jesus said in Nazareth (Lk 4: 23-27), but it is hard to see how just that would provoke so much anger. It does, however, have a hint that the prophet doesn't give any special preference or even attention to his hometown, and you can see how this might cause resentment too. Imagine his neighbors saying: "All we've done for him over the years—coached his Little League team, baked him cookies, clapped for him in the school play—and look what we get in return. Nothing! He's a big success, and he's not going to share any of it with us. Well, good riddance to him."

Any way you look at it, it seems Jesus went out of his way to devalue family relationships. Why? I think the key is in the last sentence of our morning gospel reading: "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God."

Plowing was an activity very familiar to the ancient people of that time. In fact, it would even have been familiar to many of the residents of Richfield as few as 60 years ago. A plow was a large steel blade pulled by hoses or oxen or mules that cut into the soil of a field so that seed could be planted in a row. It was hard work, and if the rows were to be straight, it required careful attention and two hands guiding the plow. I was trying to think of a modern example that would be familiar to all of us. Nowadays driving a car is as common and familiar as plowing was then. So I came up with this: Anyone who starts to drive and then keeps texting is of no use for the Kingdom of God! Can I get an Amen to that! I said: Anyone who starts to drive and then keeps texting is of no use for the Kingdom of God! Alright! Why not? Because it is a distraction. A huge distraction.

About a year ago Kathy and I were driving home from an NAACP meeting, we were in the left lane, and a car ahead of us in the right lane started to drift into our lane right in front of us. I right away honked, and the car jerked back into the lane. As we pulled up next to the car we looked over and the driver was texting. We couldn't believe it. But the best part of the story is this: Right away a police car behind her put on its flashing lights and motioned for her to pull over. In Virginia, texting while driving is not yet illegal, and I think the cop knew she was texting but couldn't pull her over until she did something else wrong. So as soon as she drifted and we honked, he had her! That was a very satisfying moment!

Why is texting while driving wrong? Well? –Because it is a distraction. Why did Jesus say what he did about family? Because it can be a distraction. Is there something wrong with burying your father? Or saying good-bye to your family?

It depends, really. If those are excuses for not getting on with important work, then maybe there is. But could anything be more important than burying your father? Some commentators have pointed out that it doesn't say that his father is dead yet, and he may mean that he will wait until his father is dead and buried before he will follow Jesus. That perhaps makes more sense, but it loses some of its punch interpreted in that way. What about the other line about having to hate your family? I think Jesus saw family ties as an enormous temptation. In its place it has its value, but more often family ties lead us astray—distract us from good work. Think of all the smart deserving youths who could benefit enormously from going to a good college, while we heap almost all of our money on sending our own kids to a college, without giving a thought to who might have gotten the most out of it. Or treating our family to a nice dinner out at a restaurant without thinking of all the hungry children that could have used that nutrition.

But how far should we carry this concern? There was an English philosopher named William Godwin (1756-1836) who published a book entitled *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793. In it he strongly advocated an ethical view of complete impartiality. We should do those actions that have the best results overall, regardless of how it might affect ourselves or our own, as we say. Godwin made his point with a famous, or infamous, example. Suppose there is a fire and two people are caught by the flames and you can only save one of them. One is a janitor and the other is Mother Theresa. Whom should you save? Oh, by the way, the janitor happens to be your mother. Godwin insisted you should save Mother Theresa, not your own mother. And the reason is a very good one—that the world would be a much better place for saving Mother Theresa. Your mother's a nice gal and all, but in the big picture she doesn't mean much. Family ties and other emotional connections should not interfere with doing the right thing. Well, of course, Godwin was greeted with a hailstorm of hatred. People were offended. But was he wrong? (By the way, if you find this question interesting, maybe you should major in philosophy when you go to college.)

Godwin had put, in philosophical terms, what an earlier English theologian had said in a famous prayer about our “affections”, by which he meant our emotions. Bishop Joseph Butler prayed:

“Help us, by the due exercise of them, to improve to Perfection, till all partial Affection be lost in that entire universal one, and Thou, O God, shalt be all in all.”

“All partial Affection” is exactly that special preference we give to our own family and friends over against others. Butler prays that this be “lost in that entire universal one.” That is, that all be considered impartially by us. Judges should be impartial, we think, in their decisions; teachers should be impartial in their grading. We don’t want people playing favorites. Well, we should all be impartial in all our decisions, Butler and Godwin think— not playing favorites for our own family and friends.

It is so easy to be lulled by the sense of security expressed in the 16th Psalm, representative, I think, of the security oftentimes of home. But it is just as easy to forget how many people lack that security of a home, or a job, or a loving community. How many people have no home to come back to. And it is our job, as a church community, to transcend our own desire for our own security, and even that of our own family, and recognize the need to provide that security for others too.

But how is this possible, you might ask? Can we do what Butler and Godwin ask of us here? Well, I think the fact that Jesus strove for this kind of impartiality is part of what leads us to see him as more than human. And if we are mere humans, if we are left merely to our own devices, it is hard to see how we could rise above our partiality and favorites. But it is part of our faith as Christians that we are not left to our own devices. There is a source we can draw on that sounds crazy to some, and just plain wrong to others. It allows us to resist the distraction of family and the natural temptation to play favorites.

In the end, I think Jesus was given to exaggeration. He said you should hate your family, to get your attention. He didn’t mean it literally, but he did think that we needed a strong pull in the other direction to counter our natural temptation to play favorites, and he expressed that by saying we should hate our family, and ignore what might seem to be our obligations to our friends. You can see how that might have alienated his family and friends, and gotten him run out of his own hometown.

Ultimately we are not meant to hate our own family, but rather to use those ties that bind and extend them well beyond our narrow family and outward to all God's children, seeing them all as our family, and offering a place for them, too, to come home. Amen.

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