

Welcome Home

Deuteronomy 6:5-7, Luke 15:11-32 (selected verses)

Sept. 10, 2023 Homecoming Sunday

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You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:5-7 NRSV

Then Jesus said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.' It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There he wasted everything he had....

The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.' "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! ...

"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast - barbecued beef! - because he has him home safe and sound.' "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him,. "His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours - but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

Luke 15:11-32 (selected verses) The Message

Coming Home. Homecoming. Home. What does that word mean for you today in this season of your life? Is it a place? People? A community where we feel safe and loved? What is your spiritual home? How does the Divine help us be at home in a deeper ways?

Home may be a place we remember. It may be a place where we are anchored. Regardless of where we roam, where is it for you? Where are you from? I grew up in Santa Ana in Orange County. Same house, same church, same neighborhood from birth to high school. My parents moved when I was in seminary. So there was a place but it has not been home for a long time.

If we remember a home, it can be the place where we felt like we belonged. It stirs up all kinds of feelings and affiliations. Sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, you recall the voices and the events that anchor that place within your heart.

But home can be a slippery memory. Sometimes the place we remember is not the place we left behind. Places and people change. We might go back to the same location, but it is usually not the same or how we remembered it.

Home is attractive for many of us precisely because it is irretrievable. If we, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, were given a magic pair of ruby slippers to transport us back home at the click of our heels, how many of us would go?

The older I get, the more I think that is true. Home is attractive, because it is irretrievable. We remember how home used to be, yet when we return, it never quite fits the familiar picture.

So home is tied to memory, but it is more than that.

Home is a place where we learn what matters and where generations pass on wisdom and values. Deuteronomy passage reminds how important this was. The Shema, a central teaching, was not only taught by holy priests, but by parents and grandparents at home. True today. Whether we grew up in a home where faith or our spiritual lives were nurtured or a home where religion was not taught or was something that we were told was irrelevant, we were shaped by those messages about the world and who we are in it.

Stories about going back home and homecoming are throughout the Bible. The parable from Luke is often called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." He leaves home. But Jesus is pretty clear that the main character is the father. He begins the parable by saying, "There was a man who had two sons..."

It's really a story about him and what it being at home with his sons means to him. He is gracious toward each one. He goes out to each son. Unlike any other father in the first century Palestinian world, this father leaves the seat of power and runs to embrace the returning younger son. That's not how it normally worked back then; a son or daughter would go all the way to the father. You never expect him to come toward you. In a shame-based village culture, that father runs to welcome his boy, thus signaling to the whole village, "Hands off, he is all mine, and I refuse to punish him since he returns to me." He cuts off the well-polished apology speech and cries out, "Bring him a princely robe and my signet ring. Call the caterers and hire the DJ. It is time for a joyful party! It is time to welcome my son home!"

Likewise, the father goes out to the older son, too. He knows it cannot truly be a joyful party unless everybody is welcomed to the rejoicing. He embodies the words that he speaks to the older son: "All that I have is yours. Everything that is mine belongs to you as well - - even that crazy brother of yours that just returned home."

Neither one of those boys did anything to deserve such treatment. That is the definition of grace: it is favorable actions that we cannot win and could not deserve. Yet it comes anyway.

Grace is powerful. It comes toward us from a God who moves beyond any system of punishment or reward. Grace comes in complete goodness, for the purpose of creating joy, to the end that all people love one another as brothers and sisters.

So home is tied to memory, tied to early messages about spirituality and mystery, and is rooted in biblical stories of grace. What does home mean to you? Is it the house where you live? As I've gotten older, my understanding of 'home' has expanded. It's not as much about a physical address anymore. It's about where my people are.

I think about this at Christmas when our two sons are only home for a short time. I'm noting the tension between wanting everyone safe and sound under my roof and also recognizing that much of life happens once you leave home.

Home can be an actual building, or it can be an identity. It can be a place of safety, which is an understandable desire in times of uncertainty and fear. Home can also be a place of exclusion, a gated fortress where four walls keep out people who are 'different' than we are. Home can be a source of pain, a reminder of who is missing, a reality that doesn't quite live up to expectations and dreams.

The idea of "home" is a great concept, and I will remain grateful for all the moments when my people are safe and sound, under one roof, especially now that my family has multiple households. I also am aware of how much richer my life is because of the way my understanding of home has expanded. The intentional practice of hospitality has transformed my understanding of home. Because if the only people in whom I'm invested are the people who live at the same address I live, then my world is very small indeed.

What does it mean to have a Homecoming Sunday at church? To feel like the church is a home, a place to explore, to be cared for, to question, to wonder and to feel connected to this Divine Mystery we call God, to follow the ways of Jesus together.

As we start the new program year in the church and begin to explore the mystery of the Universal Christ, we will be reminded of biblical images of Jesus and of Christ. The Gospel of John explains the mystery: that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us -- that the eternal wisdom in which all things were created came and made a home among us. In Greek, it says quite literally that the Word became flesh and pitched its tent in our midst. Imagine that: the Eternal God whose Spirit blows as fierce as the wind took upon our flesh, put up a canvas tarp, and drove some stakes into the ground to live among us. Wherever we wander, Christ camps with us. Incarnate – Divine love enfleshed. God's eternity makes their home in us.

Writer and pastor Frederick Buechner makes a helpful distinction. When we talk about home, says Buechner, we mean one of two different things. The first is the home we remember, and the second is the home we hope for. All of us can remember a home where the hallways are

familiar, and the voices are known. When we make homes of our own, much of what we make is rooted in the memories of the homes which were provided for us. We use the same recipes. We speak the same dialects. And yet, try as we might, when we return to our homes, they are probably not everything we remember them to be.

But then there is the home for which we hope and long for. It is our hometown, but we also hope for a vision of a spiritual home where we feel we can be authentic and can belong. We remember familiar voices, but we hope for a new song that shall cause all people to dance. We come to church to remember what home has meant. And to rediscover a deeper sense that we can be at home here with our joys and sorrows, our celebrating, eating, playing and praying.

In his book *Longing for Home*, Buechner offers these words. "When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is, and the reason we recognize it, I believe, is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us." Amen.