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# WELCOME HOME?

LUKE 4:21-30

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2019,  
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

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“I’m glad to be home again. I really can’t say where I’ve been. I have searched the world over and I’ve done most things. I’m glad to be home again.” I sing this song many times when I return home to see my parents in Miami, Florida. I ring the doorbell and begin to chirp this song as we greet each other. This song is a reminder of how good it can be to return home after being away, even after running away. A popular biblical story in Luke is about the lost son who returned home. The lost son, the youngest one, asks his father for his inheritance, leaves home for a distant country and squanders it all, and eventually finds himself having a party with pigs in their pit, giving new meaning to “pity party.” At his lowest point, the lost son realizes he can still go home to his father and when he does so, his father sees him, runs out to meet him, wraps his arms of love around him and kisses him. That young man could go home and had someone at home to love him. He was certainly glad to be home again.

‘Home’ is such an interesting ideal. A house is a physical image of home yet you can have a house and it still not be home. And, you may not have a house but it doesn’t necessarily mean you are homeless. ‘Home’ is a sense of belonging, safety, contentment, a warm embrace. Our first home is the warm, cozy womb of our mothers. Home can be a house’s kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, reading room, family room, play room. Home includes the rhythm and residue of real relationships, a milieu of rest after running, a space to be fully alive, fully oneself, fully human. Home can make us full of love, joy, peace, gratitude, life, satisfaction. It can mean stability and salvation, wholeness, healing, comfort. Home. “Deep River/My home is over Jordan. Deep River, Lord/I want to cross over into campground...Oh don’t you want to go/To the Gospel feast/That Promised land/ Where all is peace?” Home sometimes seems unattainable in the here and now. This is why Death, crossing over Jordan, is emblematic of homegoing, which is what some funerals are called. Homegoing services. Home is the goal of spiritual odysseys and the life of the journey of faith. We are always yearning for home. “Swing low sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.” “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long ways from home.”

Home is a hope but if we are honest, for some, it is hell. I take my cue from Jesus who says, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” His home is apparently not a haven. The One who was to announce the acceptable year of the Lord is not acceptable to his own people. At first, they were glad and then they become mad. Aldous Huxley, the author of the novel, *Brave New World*, said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad.” “All in the synagogue were filled with rage.” But all Jesus does is tell the truth about the wideness of God’s mercy.

He gives two Old Testament examples. First, Jesus recounts the incident in which Elijah provides an unending supply of food for a Gentile widow at Zarephath in Sidon during a severe famine but gives no food to any suffering Israelite. Then Jesus tells of the incident in which Elisha only healed Naaman, the Syrian army officer, of leprosy, although there were many lepers in Israel. In the minds of his Jewish listeners, it was offensive to be reminded that Elijah ministered to a poor Gentile widow and Elisha healed a soldier of Syria, a country which had oppressed Israel in an earlier time. These reminders of God’s acceptance of and mercy toward the ‘outsider’ Gentiles were unacceptable to those listening to Jesus in his hometown. This is why they were filled with rage. The truth that God extends a wide mercy can be very upsetting, especially when it includes ‘those people.’

A retreat leader asked participants to think of one person who best represented Christ in their lives. Many had the usual compliments for those special individuals who had “been there” during the “hard times,” but one woman hesitated before answering. When she finally spoke she said, “I had to think hard about that question. I kept thinking, ‘Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill them for it?’” (*Christian Century*, March 1998) The truth will make you mad.

The truth is so loud and clear from Jesus that the people in his hometown wanted to throw him off of a cliff. What this reveals, if we are honest, is that 'home' isn't always safe, isn't always warm, isn't always peaceful, isn't always a refuge, isn't always a welcoming space. Everyone can't always go back home because some homes will not accept you for who you are or what you have to say. Refugees flee home for safety and if they return, they will be thrown off of a cliff. Crises are at home. Domestic abuse and violence and disharmony can be at home. Home is not only a symbol for nurturing the self but can be a representation of its violation. Alcoholism at home. Disrespect at home. Part of the problem may be that you might have changed your mind or your views or your practices but home doesn't always want to change. Home doesn't want the truth so it would rather get rid of it by throwing it or you off of a cliff. Jesus's home doesn't receive the gifts he has to offer.

Yet, despite the hostile opposition, despite not being accepted and rejected, Jesus "went on his way" to people and places where his gifts of healing and cleansing could be utilized. He went to where there was room for him and for what he had to offer. Jesus is rejected at home but he refuses to engage the rage. He doesn't waste time on those who reject him. He goes to those who need him—a man with an unclean spirit, Simon's mother-in-law suffering from a high fever, a leper and a paralytic. Jesus doesn't stop his mission just because we want to stop him.

He didn't say anything when they led him to the top of the hill but just passed through them and went on his way. His body walking did the talking. Sometimes, it's best to just leave home for self-preservation and self-care. No explanations needed. No rebuttals required. Sometimes, you just have to leave home and follow your heart, to do what is right and follow the call of God on your life. Regardless of the response, Jesus keeps going to do his ministry among those on the margins of society. And the good news is that we can't get rid of him so easily. He keeps going and pops up in our homes, on our jobs, in our relationships, perhaps filling us with rage. We may not like his presence but we can't get rid of him because he yearns for home.

The common saying is "Home is where the heart is" and Jesus shows us his heart when he went on his way to lepers, paralytics, those suffering, those unclean, the outsiders. That is where his heart is. That is where his home is. In the classic TV series M\*A\*S\*H, set in a mobile army hospital during the Korean War, doctors received a patient who believed he was Jesus Christ. Arnold Chandler had been a bombardier in an airplane and had dropped many bombs on other human beings. Because of the trauma of it all, one day his mind snapped and he decided that he was no longer a man named Arnold Chandler. He was Christ the Lord. This appeared to be a mental condition that would require a lot of therapy. A psychiatrist eventually came to the man and said, "You say you are Christ, and yet here you are in an army hospital in the middle of a war. What would Jesus be doing here?" With tears streaming down his face, this supposed mentally ill man replied with these words: "I am Christ the Lord, where else should I be? These are my children."

The home of tear-stained Jesus is the suffering ones, the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Home for him is not a place; it is a people. It is not a geographical location, but relationships. And this makes sense because Jesus had no place to lay his head (Luke 9). For him, for us, home is not really a 'where' but a 'who.' Not where home is, but who home is. Home can be a 'where' but home is also, and perhaps more importantly, a 'who.' For Jesus and you, home is a 'who.' Home is God. We've spent enough time here. Let's go home.