***HOMECOMING***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Text: Luke 4:16-30

*Home is where the heart is*, they say, and going home can be a heart-warming, wonderful thing – to see family and friends and the places where your life took shape years before. But sometimes going home is hard, for while you are away the town changes, the people change, you change, and coming home may seem like a return to a foreign land that does not quite measure up to the town you held so fondly in your memory.

We don’t’ really know what led Jesus back to Nazareth, the town where he was raised. We don’t know how long he had been away or what happened there in his absence, but we know that a lot happened to Jesus in that time. He was baptized in the Jordan by John and tempted in the wilderness by the devil and began a ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee. The son of a carpenter returned to his hometown without any carpentry tools in hand but with a handful of disciples in tow; he returned with a reputation as a gifted preacher and healer; he returned to folks who knew him as the Son of Mary and Joseph, not as the Son of God. I don’t know if you go back to your home church when you go home, but Jesus did – returned to the synagogue where he had learned the faith as a boy, and there was invited to read the Scripture for the day and comment upon it. And so he did, as you heard in Sarah’ sermon last week.

The initial response to Jesus in his hometown was very positive. He was well-received, praised, even marveled at as he declared that God’s promise for the messiah was fulfilled that very day within the hearing of those gathered in the synagogue. He was off to a good start. He was wowing the congregation, and then something went terribly wrong; something turned the hometown folks into a raging mob determined to toss Jesus off the nearest cliff. Something lit a fuse and set them off and thus confirmed that not even this prophet would be accepted in his hometown. Something he said or did almost cost Jesus his life. What was it that caused such rage in the pews among Jesus’ own people that day?

There is an intimation that the crowd wanted Jesus to perform some miracles as he had elsewhere. A miracle or two would have confirmed his identity as the messiah of God, but there were no miracles performed by Jesus that day. He didn’t satisfy their desire for a show or their yearning for signs of the messiah. But that alone did not set them off. It was something that Jesus said that riled the crowd, and that something was a word from their own Scriptures.

Jesus reminded the hometown folks of two stories. The first was about Elijah being sent by God in the midst of a famine to a widow in a foreign country, to Zarephath in Sidon; there he saved her and her son from starvation with the blessing of a bottomless jar of meal and a never-ending jug of oil. The second story was about Elisha healing a reluctant commander of the Syrian army of leprosy. Elisha never even saw him, just sent a servant to tell Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times, and while Naaman the Syrian was initially resistant to doing so, he finally consented and was healed. These were miracle stories, stories about God’s grace and power showered upon folks who were suffering. How could such innocent stories of God’s amazing grace elicit such an ungracious response from the hometown congregation?

In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen writes:

*Many churches decorated with words announcing salvation and new life are often little more than parlors for those who feel quite comfortable in the old life, and who are not likely to let the minister’s words change their stone hearts into furnaces where swords can be cast into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Nouwen might have been speaking of the people in the synagogue that day with Jesus. They wanted to feel comfortable where they were. They wanted to revel in the promises of the messiah that Jesus brought to their attention and imagine that those promises might be fulfilled in their lifetime. They wanted to claim those promises for themselves and proclaim God’s judgment upon the rest of the world. But by drawing on these prophetic stories, Jesus emphasized that God’s grace was showered upon Jew and non-Jew alike. God had acted to save the life of a Sidonian widow while widows in Israel starved; God healed a Syrian commander of leprosy while lepers continued to suffer in Israel. With these bold illustrations from their own Scriptures, Jesus reminded the people that the saving acts of God were not just for them, but extended far beyond the bounds of Israel.

It was that message that riled the congregation, the suggestion that God’s love and grace were inclusive, not exclusive, that God had no *Israel First* policy but embraced all people. The Jews claimed to be God’s chosen people, but Jesus reminded them that God was at work with saving grace among the Gentiles as well. Jesus afflicted the comfortable in their pews and offered comfort to the afflicted beyond those pews, and those hometown folks did not like it! They could not handle such love and grace from the hand of their God; they raged at the suggestion that the good news for the poor and oppressed might be for all the poor and oppressed – Jew and Gentile alike. They rose up from their pews and drove Jesus to the cliffside with self-righteous anger at the hometown boy who had betrayed them with his talk of God’s inclusive grace.

In the two thousand years since that incident, we in the church of Jesus Christ have done little better, for across the centuries Christians have fallen prey to that same self-righteous rage. At certain times the Church has proclaimed salvation to be dependent upon certain practices, confessions, or sacraments in order to make an exclusive claim to God’s salvation. We have waged holy wars against so-called infidels and against one another! We have dared to claim that the grace of God is limited to those like us – whatever the prevailing notion of ***us*** might be – instead of affirming the inclusive and sovereign grace of God that extends far beyond the bounds of any Church or any nation. The truth is that the good news Jesus proclaims is for all people – for the poor and oppressed of every race, nation, orientation, and creed – not just for us.

Jesus lived that good news – eating with tax collectors, welcoming prostitutes to follow him, and offering a healing touch to those who were considered untouchables. At the same time that he reached out to the poor and oppressed, he chided self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who followed the letter of the law but never grasped its gracious spirit. Jesus was concerned with righteousness; he had no time for self-righteousness. He came to put people in right relationship with God, not to offer glowing accolades to those who were already convinced they were there. He came home proclaiming God’s inclusive grace and love for all people, including those the hometown folks despised.

That is the message he proclaimed and the good news we bear. It is a welcoming word in theory, but a word that can be hard to put into practice. It means praying for our enemies, welcoming those who are different from us, and being as gracious with the word of God as Christ was in his ministry. It means recognizing that while this is a congregation of brothers and sisters in Christ who love and support one another, we do not gather here to be insulated from the world. We gather to prepare to go and serve in it.

On the island of Iona in Scotland there is an ancient abbey. You really have to want to get there to get there. You must travel across the desolate island of Mull, take a ferry at the end of Mull across the channel to Iona, and then walk to your destination. The night Karen and I stayed there it was so quiet that from our second story farmhouse window we could hear the sound of sheep biting off the grass and chewing it. It is a peaceful, holy place. From that idyllic place, George McLeod prepared men and women for urban ministry. His vision was one of Christian engagement with the world, carrying the good news of Christ from Iona to people in the heart of Glasgow. It was a vision he expressed in these powerful words:

*I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the corner of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek (or shall we say in English, in Bantu, and in Afrikaans); at a kind of a place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where Christians should be and that is what Christians should be about.*

That is where we should be and what we should be about - welcoming to our worship and to our building and to our church family, people from all walks of life – from walks on the holy side and walks on the wild side. It is going out and reaching out and speaking out in love and grace to those in the pew with you and those in the neighborhood with you and those who seemingly aren’t with you at all. It is serving not only those in need down the street but those in need in distant streets in distant lands. It is rejecting any policy or position that insists on putting one’s nation first or one’s self first or one’s political party first or one’s religion first or one’s race first ahead of putting God first and so answering God’s call to meet the needs of others in the world, for all people are God’s children. We bear responsibility for children at the border as much as we do those children at the Boy’s and Girl’s Club we served on Friday. We are called to minister to the needs of the hungry in Yemen and Syria as well as to the hungry at Valley Mission. We are called to welcome the stranger in our midst, the alien in our land, and the sinner down the street because they all are children of God. The same grace and love that are poured out for us, are poured out for them. That is the good news Jesus proclaimed, not just for us, but for the world! Now if that good news makes you uncomfortable or makes you feel like your toes have been stepped on, then don’t blame me – blame Jesus. Or better yet, do what he says and love ***all*** your neighbors! Amen

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, p.86 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)