

HOMECOMING -- PART 2
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Not all homecomings are celebrations. Some homecomings are not even pleasant. Those who have served in the military overseas have experienced all kinds of homecomings, some good, some not so good. Coming home after a long absence, no matter how long one has been away and no matter how much one may be looking forward to it, can be full of surprises. Everything seems a bit smaller except for the trees. The neighbors are no longer the same ones that lived there when we lived there before. Even our own family has changed. The “feel” of home and the neighborhood is somehow different now. It’s not the same. The same is true when one returns to a church one may once have belonged to. Grateful for the saints who have remained faithful throughout the years, we now see new faces and we discover that things are not being done the way we remember. That’s not all bad. At this church’s 75th anniversary last October, one person observed that, upon returning here, she saw lots of faces she did not recognize, and she saw that as a good thing. The church had changed and grown.

One of the most well-known of Jesus’ stories is that of a homecoming. The parable of the prodigal son tells the story of the joyful return home of one son and the jealous resentment of his older brother who never left home.

I wonder how Jesus felt upon returning to Nazareth. We are told, as we saw last week, that he “was praised by everyone” (Luke 4:15). And today we read that “All spoke

well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Luke 4:22). Surely such sentiments could not have been missed by Jesus as he returned home. Surely such appreciation and admiration could not have been ignored by Jesus. Perhaps the family and friends expected at least a little gratitude from Jesus, some kind of acknowledgement of how proud they were of him.

But Jesus seems oblivious to all such sentiment. Having just come out of a 40-day sojourn in the desert where he faced and resisted temptations which most of us can only imagine, Jesus’s mission seems to be not one of engaging in sappy sentimentality, of warm and fuzzy hugs, but to declare that he is the incarnation of the one of whom Isaiah spoke, words Jesus read earlier: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

While his hearers seem to appreciate Jesus’ boldness, they do not take him or his words seriously. Jesus goes on to tell them he has come for the outsider as much as the insider, and if the insiders do not welcome or appreciate the outsider, then they are the losers. Jesus points to Elijah who served a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and to Elisha who healed Naaman the Syrian, both of whom were considered outsiders by Israel. Jesus opens his two illustrations with the words, “The truth is,”

That’s a clue as to what Jesus is about. In his homecoming and in all his teaching and preaching, he is about telling the truth -- the truth about the gospel of God’s grace and mercy and love. But sometimes that truth is hard to take, especially for those of us who have already decided that we know the truth, namely, that God loves us

and there are others God does not love. Is it any wonder that the very ones who a few moments before had welcomed, praised, and marveled at Jesus, became enraged at him, drove him out of town, and threatened to throw him over a cliff?

Jesus is addressing the question that Pilate will answer later in John's Gospel, "What is truth?" While initially sounding like an invitation to engage in some abstract, philosophical dialogue in which the answer would be some kind of ephemeral, head-in-the-clouds, abstract explanation, the reality is that Jesus' notion of truth is the honest, straightforward affirmation that God loves everybody and no one has an inside track on that love or on truth.

Now, what does that look like in our lives? This week and next week the Junior and Senior High Sunday school class is discussing precisely this question (in the curriculum **Way to Live**). In addition to looking at some passages of Scripture, we are looking at examples of persons, some fiction and some real persons, who exemplify Jesus' understanding of truth. Often doing and living the truth does not win popularity contests, as Jesus himself found out. One is found in the movie **Dead Man Walking**, a true story in which a Roman Catholic nun, Sister Helen Prejean, agrees to serve as the spiritual advisor to a convicted rapist-killer, Matthew Poncelet. Poncelet wants to blame everyone but himself, even refusing to confess his crime. Sister Prejean refuses to let Poncelet off the hook. Only in facing up to the truth of his actions will Poncelet experience redemption. Then, just before he is led to the execution chamber he says to Sister Prejean, "I have to die to find love. Thank you for loving me!"

Sister Prejean does what no one else wanted to do, namely, to accompany someone considered to be an outsider to the point at which he can experience God's

love and redemption and then he can comprehend that he, too, is a child of God.

Or, take the case of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's novel ***To Kill a Mockingbird***. An attorney in a small southern town during the Great Depression, Finch is called upon to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been falsely accused of raping a white woman. Knowing that some townspeople expect Atticus to mount only a token defense, he knows how only to do his very best, risking the ire of many of the townspeople. Although it becomes clear in the trial that Robinson is innocent, the jury convicts him anyway. But Atticus Finch insisted not only on finding out the truth from a legal point-of-view, but he also insists on living the truth of integrity, defending to the very best of his ability someone who was clearly an outsider at that time and in that place.

At its best the church lives that truth that Jesus offers, the truth of God's amazing grace, love, and extravagant acceptance that always seems to surprise us. In her book ***Traveling Mercies*** Anne Lamott talks about being down and out and hearing singing coming from a church across the street where she lived in Marin City, California. This small church, St. Andrew Presbyterian, had only about 30 people in worship, but they loved music and they loved to sing. Never pressuring visitor Lamott, they nevertheless welcomed her. Lamott writes: "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home* -- that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now'" (p. 100).

At another place in this book Lamott shares a story her pastor, Veronica, a tall African-American woman, told about a childhood friend of hers. "When she (that is, Veronica) was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and

down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.' Lamott goes on to write: "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine -- because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home" (p. 55).

The irony in Jesus' coming home to Nazareth, of course, is that he offers himself as home for anyone who will listen. But those in his hometown thought that they knew best what home was, and they were it. Drive Jesus out of town because he's trying to change things, he's telling us something we don't want to hear, he wants to welcome those who are different from us.

That one who had no home of his own, no place to lay his head, offers us himself -- grace, forgiveness, love, and acceptance. How can we reject his extravagant generosity? And how could we ever begrudge that same generosity for others, indeed, for anyone, regardless of who they are? It's not ours to decide who's in and who's out. For Jesus, all are in. Sometimes living the truth of Jesus causes us to swim against the stream -- like Sister Prejean, like Atticus Finch, like St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California, like Jesus himself. Living the truth is more than the difference between telling the truth and telling a lie. It's discovering the freedom and the joy that come with knowing that all of us -- **all of us** -- are God's children, and all of us are invited to discover our home in him. What good news that is!

Welcome home! Thanks be to God.