

*Back Home*

Luke 15

Homecoming, September 11, 2016

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

*(from the anthem)* “Lead me back to my home.” And all I can say is: Today, if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.

If it feels like you have wandered away – even if you didn’t mean to, even if it’s just a matter of being distracted – and you wonder if you can ever find your way home again, the answer is ... Yes!

If you wonder if anyone is willing to hear you and not turn away from your tears, the answer is ... Yes!

If you are feeling alone and you wonder if your presence matters to anyone, the answer is ... Yes!

So today if you hear it – if you hear that “yes!” in our voices and the choir’s voices and in that voice deep down in your soul – then do not harden your hearts.

Now do I have a few more things to say about “home?” The answer is ... Yes.

In fact I’m wondering this morning, if I say “back home,” what comes to mind?

In Adult Learning this morning, Cherry Johnson helped us think about what “home” means to us and I got thinking about walking through that door, after this lovely summer away. When I walked into that apartment, immediately, completely, viscerally I knew I was “back home.” I kept trying to put my finger on what it was. Was it my stuff? Was it memories? Was it the familiar? Was it that this place is some kind of reference point for my identity? Was it spiritual?

Maybe it's all those things and more. What I knew, deep down in my bones, was that I was "back home."

Now I realize that I don't have to be in a particular place to be "back home."

"Back home" is the sound of a football game playing in the background of a Sunday afternoon nap.

"Back home" is the smell of fresh cut grass. And it doesn't matter where I am because, after all those years of mowing lawns, when I get a whiff of that smell, I'm right back home.

"Back home" is the place I imagined where everything broken got fixed and every hurt got healed. And even if that isn't really true, "back home" is the hope I hold on to that healing can happen.

"Back home" is places and smells and people and ways of doing things and our hopes for healing.

"Back home," in other words, is the stories we have to tell.

And so, when Jesus wants to make some sense of his life for those who don't quite get it, he tells a story about finding your way back home.

Actually he tells three stories in Luke 15. About a shepherd who has one hundred sheep but loses one so he goes looking for it until he tracks it down. "And when he comes home," Jesus says, the shepherd invites all his friends and neighbors to a party. Because "back home" is the place where you celebrate finding that which was lost.

Then Jesus tells a story about a woman who has ten coins but she loses one and she turns her house upside down to look for it. When she finds it, she invites all her friends and neighbors to a party because "back home" is the place where you celebrate finding that which was lost.

And then this story, about a father who has two sons. One stays home and the other goes on a grand adventure perhaps to find himself. And eventually he does – in a pigpen, abandoned by his friends, with no future in sight.

So this younger son begins to remember “back home.” That’s the place where workers are paid a living wage and no one is left to go hungry.

So “when he came to himself,” the story says, he said “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

Now the truth is, Jesus says, “back home” is also the place where this parent is waiting for his child, searching the horizon for some sign. And when he sees his son coming down that road, he runs to meet him and he throws his arms around him and welcomes him home. He has been waiting for this day.

The great American novelist, Andrew Holleran, says that “Home is where someone waits for you.” And I always think about that line in I Corinthians in which Paul tells that early Christian community, “when you come together to eat, *wait* for one another.” Because “home is where someone waits for you.”

But in this series of stories, “back home” is more than that. It’s not just a love that is waiting for you. The shepherd goes out to look for the lost sheep. The woman turns her house upside down to look for that lost coin. The father let his son go but he is still looking for him.

I know that there is plenty of reason to be cynical about churches who are out looking for people in the name of “evangelism” – trying to convince people of their version of good news. A lot of what I hear of that “good news” sounds like terribly bad news to me.

But let's be clear about this. Let's not be cynical about the kind of love that goes looking for people. "Back home," Jesus says, there is a shepherd who is not content to let sheep be lost. There's a woman who is not content – she cannot afford – to let a coin go missing. There's a parent who may have had to let a child go, but that parent is out on the road every day looking for that child to come home.

"Back home" is the stories we tell about a love that goes looking for us.

This summer I was re-reading Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*. Rob is a former pastor of an evangelical mega-church just outside Grand Rapids, Michigan. He spoke here a few years ago. And he says he wrote the book because they were having an art exhibit at his church and there was an art piece being displayed that included a quote by Mahatma Gandhi. As he was going through the exhibit, he found a note someone had attached to that art piece that read: "Reality check; Gandhi is in hell."

"Really?" Rob Bell writes. This is the God people believe in?

And that's an important question because he says later in his book: "We shape our God, and then our God shapes us." In other words, the stories we tell about God and the world and ourselves matter because they shape us. So what are the stories we are telling?

Near the end of his book, Rob Bell comes to this story about the prodigal in Luke 15 and he notices that each of the characters are telling their own stories. And the question is: which story will we believe?

The younger son has a story: Once I was a son; but now I am not worthy to be one and the best I can hope for is to be a valuable worker. The story he is telling is about not being worthy.

I have been doing this church thing long enough to know that one of the common stories people have tell is about shame – not just feeling guilty about something they have done but feeling ashamed of who they are.

And I've discovered that the longer people keep telling themselves this shame story, they come to believe it so strongly that they can't believe anything else.

The older brother has his own story. When he is on his way home, he hears the party going on and he asks: "What's all the music and dancing about?"

"Your brother has come home," one of the servants says, "and everyone is celebrating." Everyone, that is, except the older brother who is angry and refuses to come home.

So the father, just like he did for his younger son, goes out to look for him. And the older brother tells his story: "Listen!" he says, "for all these years I have been working like a slave for you and I have never disobeyed your command but you have never given me even a young goat – let alone the fatted calf – to celebrate with my friends."

Now, let me say that the older brother has a point. It doesn't feel good to be taken for granted. But I hear his story too – people telling themselves that they just have to keep working and trying to accomplish things because somehow it will prove that they are worthy. And they look for that ultimate recognition that will somehow prove their lives are worth something. So the story they keep telling themselves is that, if they can get it all right and get it all done, *then* people will see how good they are and they will have some way to prove to themselves and that their lives were worth something.

Ironically, and maybe you noticed, the stories the younger son and the older son tell are essentially the same. They are both about somehow proving they are worthy.

But then there is the story the father has to tell. He says to the older one, "Son, you are always with me" -- because just like you, the lost one was never lost to me. All those days he was gone, I was looking for him.

And all those day you were working out in the fields, I was waiting for you to come home. Like your brother, I worried that something might happen to you. And I celebrated every day that you walked through that door. You didn't have to prove anything to me because you are, like your brother, "always with me."

So what are the stories we are telling ourselves and the world? They are important because they shape who we are.

"Back home" for us is singing Rod Romney's "Bring us Home." We have been doing this for a lot of years because it's story we have to tell that shapes who we are.

It comes from the experience of parents who rejected their son and struggled with him right up till the time he died of AIDS. When the parents came to their son's funeral here at Seattle First Baptist Church and they started to see what they had missed. They started to see that the story they told themselves about their son wasn't true and they regretted the time they had wasted and lost. They were prodigals and they needed to find their own way back home. They had to learn how to tell a new story about their son and about themselves.

I think Jim Segaar is right when he says that "back is not the way home." The home the prodigal left is not the same one he returned to. He had changed. He had a new story to tell. And his brother needed to find a new story of his own if he was ever to find *his* way home again.

In other words, "back home" is not just nostalgia about the "good old days."

We sing "Bring Us Home" this morning not just to remember the "glory days" of Seattle First Baptist Church – and it's true that we have amazing stories to tell – but we have new stories too of a love that has been waiting for us and looking for us and is always with us. "Back home" is being *renewed* on love's redeeming tide."

We cannot sell our story short by only telling the stories of the past because, if we do, we may start to believe that the best part of our lives and our life together is over.

“Back home” the prodigal and the older brother and the father got to tell a new story about all the scattered people that were finding their way home.

So, if it feels like you have wandered away – even if you didn’t mean to, even if it’s just a matter of being distracted – and you wonder if you can ever find your way home again, the answer is ... Yes!

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#### NOTES

Andrew Holleran, *Grief* (Hachette Books, 2007). Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (HarperOne, 2011), pp. 1, 182 & 183; his work with the prodigal story can be found in the chapter “The Good News Is Better Than That,” pp. 163-191. Jim Segaar has written a collection of reflections, *Advent With My Family*, that will be available in advance of Advent at Seattle First Baptist Church, 2016; see p.66.