

On Our Way Home

Mark 9.33-37

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The Second Sunday in Homecoming

with poet Richard Blanco

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Mark 9.33-37

They returned home to Capernaum. Once they were inside the house, Jesus began to ask them, “What were you discussing *on the way home*?” At this they fell silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who among them was the most important. So Jesus sat down and called the Twelve over and said, “If any of you wants to be first, you must be the last one of all and at the service of all.”

Then Jesus brought a little child into their midst and, putting his arm around the child, said to them, “Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.”

On Our Way Home

[From the Choral Prayer “R’Tzei”]

*God, who is near to all who call,
turn to your servants and be merciful;*

*Pour out your spirit over us
and restore your presence within us.*

This is our prayer ... and all the people say: “Amen.”

You know, according to Matthew, Jesus quotes the Hebrew prophet Isaiah when he comes to the Temple and says, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, all people.” And if you know the story, things got a little messy in the process.

Having said that, we are trying our best here at Seattle First Baptist Church to remember that God’s house, the one Jesus claimed, was intended to be a house of prayer for all people.

So, because this sacred space is a house of prayer not only for us but for the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue and because our spiritual lives intersect at so many points, we know that our Jewish sisters and brothers are on this journey from Rosh Hashanah, New Year, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement or, as some say, the

day of “at-one-ment.” It’s a journey headed for that experience of being one with our truest selves and our beloved others and that love that will never let us go.

So I have been reading Rabbi Olivier’s reflections on this journey and noticed that those reflections are a conversation on forgiveness. Because, if we are headed for at-one-ment, conversations matter. And it’s a conversation about forgiveness because bitterness and blame and guilt probably won’t get us there.

I would just like to make one political observation. It just seems to me that if someone wants to make “America great again,” (which, by itself is suspect to my way of thinking), if someone wants to head us in that direction of an American ‘greatness,’ then the kind of conversations we have matter. And accusations and insults and bullying and bravado probably won’t get us there.

On the journey toward somewhere, it’s often the conversations along the way that determine whether we get there or not.

That’s why I love this story Pastor Ned read for us this morning from Mark 9. The disciples are headed home from another of their mission trips. And, when they get to the house, Jesus asks, innocently enough, “What were you talking about on the way home?”

And the disciples are silent because they had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. Perhaps they knew instinctively that this was not the kind of conversation that was going to get them to where they were going with Jesus.

So Jesus says, “the one who is greatest is the one who learns to be a servant.”

And then he calls over a little child, and he puts his arm around her, and says, ‘whoever welcomes her, welcomes me and welcomes the One who sent me – the One, as a matter of fact, who put me on this journey in the first place.’ When you welcome her, you are saying ‘yes’ to this direction we are heading in together.

For this place where we are headed, conversations matter. And it’s a conversation about welcome and service because ego and power aren’t going to get us there.

New Testament scholars tell us that there were “household codes” in the culture of Jesus’ day and those codes concentrated all the power of the household into the hands of the father and then down the line to wives, children and slaves; although,

it's hard to see much of a power differential between women, children and slaves because anything below "head of the house" was pretty much disempowered.

So when the disciples are on their way home and they are arguing about who among them is the greatest and Jesus brings a child into the center of the conversation, he isn't just making a point. He's turning the tables on the power structure of the day. He's changing the whole dynamics of the conversation; because, if they are going to get where they are headed with Jesus, the kinds of things they talk about and how they talk about them along the way really matter. So here we are on this journey of homecoming and, on our way home, our conversations matter. We talk about welcome because the direction we are headed is the home that is this 'house of prayer for all people.'

And that means, God knows, that we talk about welcome a lot. We talk about what it means ... and what it doesn't mean. We talk about how good we are at it or how much we have failed. We tell stories of being welcomed – and not. And the truth is, we don't always get it right.

Still, it's the conversation we keep having, not just because we want to be 'nice' or because it is a strategy for church growth. We keep having this conversation because that's the direction of 'home.'

When I was in graduate school in Chicago, I invited an African-American friend of mine to come with me on a visit to my small hometown in Michigan. We didn't have mail delivery in that little town so the tradition was that people would pick up their mail in the morning at the post office and then stop by the local donut shop for coffee ... and gossip. I loved that tradition.

So one morning, I stopped by my dad's office to say that my friend and I were heading down to pick up the mail. But as we were leaving, my dad called me back into the office and said, "Now I just want you to know that if Mr. Cole comes in to the donut shop, he might say something rude to your friend."

"What?" I said. How could that be? I grew up knowing Mr. Cole. I went to school with his son. I had been in that donut shop since I was a kid and I never heard him say anything negative about black folks.

"Just be careful," my dad said.

We did go pick up the mail that day. And we did stop briefly at the donut shop. Mr. Cole wasn't there. But as we walked back to our house – my friend and I lost in some kind of conversation – I realized that my little hometown didn't feel like home to me anymore. It was all familiar and strange at the same time.

If we are on our way home, conversations matter. And we are likely to spend a lot of time talking about welcome, and who does what and, as Richard Blanco has been teaching us, telling stories – stories that are part memory and part vision.

I remember that day in my little hometown and, no matter how cloudy my memory of it may be, the experience, as I remember it, clarifies my vision of the home I'm looking for. I tell the story because it helps me imagine the kind of home I'm hoping for. And if we are going to ever get there, we need a lot of conversation about hope.

It's brilliant, I think, that, in the story about a conversation “on the way home,” Jesus brings a child into the center of the room.

Patrick and I went to visit Jeff and Melissa Thirloway's new little grandbaby on Friday. She was only a few hours old and, of course, she is beautiful. Here we were, all these adults sitting around having yet another conversation in a long string of conversations. We spend a lot of time talking about the world and our families and our lives.

But this conversation was different. For one, we were a lot quieter than we usually are – there were long silences when we just sat there together with our attention zeroed in on that new little life still waiting for a name.

We did what adults seem to instinctively do around a baby – we dropped our egos about how intellectual we are and how highly trained to be articulate and settled into those oos and ahhs and that gibberish that is the profound universal language of babies.

And on the way home, I realized that I just couldn't be cynical with a child in the room. We couldn't afford it. Her presence changed the dynamics of the conversation and the only thing that made sense was hope.

If we are on our way home, conversations matter. I'm guessing we will spend a lot of time talking about welcome and service and what it means to belong. We will

talk about service and we will tell stories that are part memory and part vision – stories that nudge us out of our cynicism and inspire us to hope.

And so, as Richard Blanco says: “We head home ...”

We head home: through the gloss of rain or weight of snow, or the plum blush of dusk, but always, always home, always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop and every window, of one country – all of us – facing the stars. Hope – a new constellation waiting for us to map it, waiting for us to name it – together.

And today, on your way home, if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Richard Blanco, *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet’s Journey* (Beacon Press, 2013).