

Come Home: A Sermon on Luke 15  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church  
Homecoming, September 11, 2022

Welcome home. Welcome home, all you church members, all you visitors, all you gathered, all you scattered. Welcome home, all you here in the sanctuary in person, and all you worshipping online. Welcome home, all you children, youth, young adults, all you middle-aged and all you elders. Welcome home, all you friends, siblings, musicians, dreamers, dancers, wonderers, wanderers, workers, caregivers, lovers, poets, artists, scientists, activists. Welcome home, all you children of the Holy, all you dear ones made in the image of a beautiful, queerly-beloved divine Creator, Parent, Friend. Welcome home.

In this church, Homecoming is one of our big holidays. Some churches have a “rally day” where they make a big push to get folks in the pews and kickoff the start of the program year. But here at Seattle First Baptist Church, we call it Homecoming. In our Godly Play Sunday school class for elementary-aged children, the color for Homecoming is red, like Pentecost, and so this year we are decorating everything in red. That’s because on Pentecost, we remember how the Holy Spirit was God-breathed into all people and all creation in all corners of the world. And on Homecoming, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we gather back in, we celebrate that we are a church family together, and we welcome each other home, in all our diversity, all our difference, all our uniqueness. We choose to be here together, we choose to be church together, we choose to make this place a home for each other.

But when we pause a moment, we should consider: what does it mean to welcome each other home? Where are we coming home from? What does being a home mean? While the words “welcome home” are beautiful, we know that home is a complicated concept for many people.

For some, home is a physical place—a building, a house, a room, a city or state or country. For some, home is a person or a group of people, and you feel at home whenever you are with those people. And for some, home is elusive, as it is hard to find a place to belong, or a place that is safe, because your house or your family of origin were not safe for you. Home is complicated. And we must recognize that, and hold each other tenderly in that.

I think our parables in Luke 15 have something to tell us about “home” today. As Pastor Mario read, these parables of the lost coin and lost sheep, and the other story in the triad, of the lost sons, are about being “lost.” On a day all about “home,” what does being lost have to do with anything?

I think there are different kinds of being lost. Perhaps the sheep knew something about that—one sheep ventures out on her own, trying to find a new way of being, trying to explore or discover. Or one sheep wanders a little too far, and suddenly experiences isolation and separation from all she knows and loves. Or perhaps that sheep was driven to leave by the herd, shunned because of her identity or for asking uncomfortable questions. As we say in Godly Play, I wonder... and I call to mind the lyric from “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” “prone to wander, how I feel it, prone to leave the God I love...” I wonder what caused the sheep’s wandering?

And there’s the kind of getting lost that we hear about in the parable of the woman and the coin. Perhaps the coin was misplaced, it fell behind the dresser or got shoved under a rug? Perhaps the woman had saved it for a special purpose but forgot where she put it? Unless we anthropomorphize the coin, we know that the coin couldn’t have gotten itself lost on its own, but that the act of “losing” was done to the coin. I wonder...have we ever been lost? Been left? Been misplaced?

And of course, the most famous of this triad of parables: the lost son. Those who have thought about the parable a lot, or who remember my sermon from the spring on this scripture, will remember that there are TWO sons in this parable. The prodigal, who wanders off of his own accord and takes his father's money with him. And the older brother, who stays home and does what he's supposed to, only to feel left out when his younger brother returns. We might say there are different kinds of being lost in those parables, and different understandings of what it means to be at home for the two brothers, as well.

So, when I say, "welcome home," when we say, "welcome home" to each other on this special holiday in the life of our community, I welcome you from your wandering, from your being lost, from your weekly sojourn outside the walls of this church or from your long absence from church into your "trying this worship thing again." I welcome you, whether you have found your own way back through the wilderness of questioning and searching, or whether someone has found you, and invited you here. I welcome you home with the understanding that for the shepherd to find out he lost his sheep, and for the woman to find out she lost a coin, they had to COUNT. And upon counting, they realized something, someone was missing, and they knew they could not be whole without that missing, that lost, that wandering piece.

And it is the same with you, dear church. We are not the same without you. We are not whole without you. Beloved church, we need each other, and that includes you.

That includes all of you who grew up being a "different kind of Baptist" and needing to find another way to understand being part of this branch of the Christian family tree. That includes all of you who were excluded from a community because of your gender identity, sexual orientation, or family structure. That includes all of you who were shunned or

ignored or isolated for asking questions of your faith, of your church, of privilege and power, of “chosenness” and supremacy. That includes all of you who wander because you needed to spend time discovering yourself and getting to know the shape of yourself and the space you needed to take up in the world. Each of you matter. And we need each of you to be US.

I wonder if part of being home together means being a holding place for the lost, the outcast, the stranger, the neighbor, the newcomer, the “I don’t know where I belong” ones. To be this kind of home, we need to choose to be a holding place. That means that we make choices to welcome each other, to provide hospitality to one another, to meet each other’s needs, to get to know each other as whole people. That means that do our best to live the values that we affirm as a congregation, and that we call each other in when we don’t live up to them, and we help each other find a way forward. That means that we hold each other accountable as we learn and grow, trying on new language and new understandings of power and privilege, so that we can center those who have been pushed to the margins of society and disenfranchised by the powers that be. To create home together, we must listen to each other’s stories and recognize each other’s wounds and respect each other’s joys and concerns and questions. And we must do what we can to restore each other to wholeness.

Seattle First Baptist Church, you have been doing many of these things for 153 years. You have been creating a church home for so many people for a long time. You have been shaping the Seattle community and this neighborhood. You have been showing what it means to be Baptists that affirm LGBTQIA+ people. You have been showing what it means to follow the Way of Jesus Christ by sharing time, energy, resources, prayer, presence and activism with our larger Seattle, Washington and USA community. And we continue to have

opportunities ahead of us to keep learning how we can be home to each other and growing towards that goal of welcoming and embracing all people. Notice the action verbs I named—learnING, growING, welcomING, embracING. We can't be passive and create a church home—we must actively DO it.

We do this by educating ourselves about antiracism and listening deeply to our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color siblings and members. We do this by pursuing ways to improve access to our building for people with disabilities, as we are considering in our important conversations about the future of church facilities. We do this by eliminating barriers to participation by stewarding our online church spaces, such as worshipping on Facebook and meeting in groups on Zoom with our members and friends across the country and world. We do this by fostering fellowship opportunities, such as coffee hour and Place at the Table and Small Groups and Youth Group. We get better at being home to each other by searching each other out, by noticing who is on the edges of community, by introducing ourselves to each other and witnessing each other's experience. We get better at being home to each other by accompanying each other through the trials of life—the daunting diagnoses, the heartaches and loss, the mental health and addiction struggles, the joys of new life and the complexities of life transitions.

Friends, I am so glad we are creating church home together. I pray that we will be, that we are, a place where the lost ones can come. A place where we search and find each other. A place where we are restored together, where we are not afraid to do or be something new, but we are dedicated to communion and community. A place where we recognize our common home on this planet, and we seek to shape our church home based on our connection with our Mother Earth and our stewardship of the resources in Creation. A place where we can point each other in the

right direction, where we come alongside each other and accompany each other through life's ups and downs and twists and turns. A place where we reach out to each other, and we feel empowered to reach back.

The song, Crowded Table, that we sang earlier, is a bit of an anthem for me. Not only do I love Brandi Carlisle, one of the musicians in the group the Highwomen, and not only did they record this song in Nashville, a place dear to my heart, but I think this song paints a beautiful picture of what church can be and do together. Thank you, Ben, for bringing it to us as congregational song.

Hear these words from the song:

“You can hold my hand  
When you need to let go  
I can be your mountain  
When you're feeling valley-low  
I can be your streetlight  
Showing you the way home  
You can hold my hand  
When you need to let go

....

If we want a garden  
We're gonna have to sow the seed  
Plant a little happiness  
Let the roots run deep  
If it's love that we give  
Then it's love that we reap  
If we want a garden  
We're gonna have to sow the seed.”

Action words, again. Hold. Let go. Sow. Plant. Let the roots run deep. Give. Reap.

I pray that we, like the song, can have a Crowded Table—because, as followers of the Way of Jesus, we are called to gather at the table together, to share in communion with each other and the saints, and to know God through breaking bread with one another. The song says, “The door is always open, your picture’s on my wall, everyone’s a little broken and everyone belongs.” Dear ones, this is a vision for this church family of Seattle First Baptist. “Everyone belongs.”

So, welcome home, all you precious humans. Welcome home, all you sinners and saints. Welcome home, all you wanderers and all you followers and all you sheep in the flock. Welcome home, beloved children of the Holy. The door is open. Come on in. Come on home.

May it ever be so. Amen.

And now let us sing that beloved heritage hymn, “Bring Us Home,” as a reflection of who we are now, and who we, God-willing, will continue to become. The hymn is printed in your bulletins.