

eLectionary Readings Discussion for Sunday, March 14, 2010

A Ministry of Christ the Redeemer Church, San Marcos, Texas

Fourth Sunday in Lent 2010

COME HOME

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The Lectionary Readings for the week:

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The concept of "homecoming" is common in scripture. Logically, one cannot "come home" without "leaving home" in the first place. If, when we die, we "go home"; it implies that we "left home" to go somewhere else. I remember the line from "Men in Black" in which Tommy Lee Jones says "Elvis didn't die, he just WENT HOME." We often speak euphemistically about home without realizing the significance of our words. Did we "come from God"? If not, to where do we "go home to" (sic)? Do atheists just "die" without a "home" to go "home to"? How sad for them. Agnostics obviously don't KNOW to where they go? To the Jews after the Diaspora, "going home" meant returning to the Promised Land. To the Christian, "going home" means returning to the presence of our "family" and Father? All these scriptures have a thread of "homecoming" contained in their words and intentions. See if you can identify these "homecomings" as you read the passages. All my patients "go home": either to THEIR home, the NURSING HOME or HOME to God but, they ALL go HOME from the hospital. One of the great questions that occupy our minds is "Where do I go when I die?" Hopefully, this discussion will clarify and encourage us when we face that final question in our lives. I think of Heaven as the ultimate "homecoming" to the presence of God from whence I originated. What is your definition? Chase the "rabbit" down the "hole" and exercise your heart and mind for a trice.

Joshua 5:9-12

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

The name, Gilgal, sounds like the Hebrew word for “roll” hence the name’s being used to describe the “rolling away of the disgrace of Egypt” by the circumcision of the males who had been born in the desert since the exodus from Egypt. They were not “circumcised again”. The males who had been born in the desert were YET to be circumcised. Circumcision was the “mark” of a male’s belonging to the “sons of Abraham”. It was also practiced in Egypt for health purposes. A lot of what we “practice” is merely a “shadow” of some other practice altered to conform to our image of “Christianity”. For instance, the Passover Feast was “transformed” to signify the “sacrifice and grace of God” shown by Christ who “delivers us” from sin in the same way that God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. What should this passage teach me? God provided “manna” for the people until they could stand on their own and produce crops in the Promised Land. God PROVIDED what was NEEDED until he could PROVIDE something NEW and BETTER. The Israelites CAME HOME and God welcomed them. Their homecoming is a metaphor for our homecoming to God’s presence.

Psalm 32 Page 624, BCP

Beati quorum

1

***Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!***

2

***Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, *
and in whose spirit there is no guile!***

3

***While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long.***

4

***For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.***

5

***Then I acknowledged my sin to you, *
and did not conceal my guilt.***

6

***I said, " I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." *
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.***

7

***Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of
trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.***

8

You are my hiding-place;

2

- you preserve me from trouble; *
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.*
- 9
*"I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; *
I will guide you with my eye.*
- 10
*Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; *
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you."*
- 11
*Great are the tribulations of the wicked; *
but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.*
- 12
*Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.*

God "attracts" us to God's presence because there is BENEFIT in being in God's presence. IF there is no appreciation for the "blessing" of God's presence, there is absolutely no reason to be "close to God". Horses and mules have to be "bridled" to keep them near us. Anyone who has owned animals understands this behavior. Is it the "restraint" of sin that draws us to and keeps us near to God? God has not forsaken us: we have forsaken God. Why would we "forsake" the source of our protection and benefit? Is it our ego, our pride, our stupidity? Possibly, it is all three. Confession is the admission of wrong-doing in a meaningful way. Simply saying "I'm sorry" without the follow-up of true repentance is "cheap grace" and does no one any good. It is a matter of trust, isn't it? We value the presence of those we trust and shun the presence of those we mistrust. Do we really trust God? "I KNOW whom I have believed and AM PERSUADED that HE is able to keep that which I have COMMITTED unto Him against that day." WE are the problem when it comes to being "under the protective wing" of God. He is ready but, we are not. What will it take for us to trust God? The need for reconciliation, because it is GOOD for us, demands our confession and our repentance. God waits for our homecoming into God's presence.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ,

be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is one of several passages that Paul uses to discuss the relationship between the sinner, Christ and God. It is “spiritual language” in that it rises above the ordinary into the sublime realms of heavenly relationships. First, we have to accept the GIFT of Salvation through our FAITH in Christ. Secondly, we have to accept that we are no longer the same; we become NEW CREATURES. We still dwell in our same body but take on a spiritual character and, thirdly, we become RECONCILED to being AMBASSADORS for Christ. There are also three aspects of a “life ministry”. First, there has to be a “call” to a “ministry”. Secondly, we have to be aware of accepting that ministry and, thirdly, we have to BECOME THE MINISTRY. By adhering to these “steps to ambassadorship”, we are reconciled and become true “representatives” of God through Christ. The term, “reconciled”, is an accounting term that describes a “balancing of accounts” by which accounts which are “out of balance” are corrected and made “balanced”. The “thing” that balances our accounts is FAITH in Christ as the one who “made up the difference” so that we are “right with God”. An ambassador is one who “faithfully represents the one who sent him”. It is reflexive of “Abraham BELIEVED God and God imputed it to him as RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Confession leads to forgiveness, forgiveness leads to reconciliation and reconciliation lead to PEACE with GOD. We, therefore, become AMBASSADORS of PEACE between the Creator and the Creation. Does this make sense? Did Paul make a good argument for our faith in Christ and its benefits? Am I an “ambassador of peace”? Am I an ambassador who pleads for the ex-patriot to “come home”?

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 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."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was

filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

We have all heard this story many times in our lives. What new “lessons” can we learn from studying it anew? Why did Luke separate the tax collectors from the sinners? One was “official” and the other “unofficial”? The Pharisees and the Scribes had no trouble “lumping” them together and even “grumbled” about it while condemning Jesus for associating and EATING with both groups. This is only one of many instances in which Jesus judged the hearts of humans rather than the obvious state of “sin” in which they existed. Does Jesus “look” at me the same way? Christ’s answer to the “grumbling” and accusation of poor judgment is the “Parable of the Prodigal Son”. (“Prodigal” means “extravagant” or “wasteful”, not “lost”.) How was the “prodigal” extravagant or wasteful? He squandered his inheritance, ergo; he was “extravagant” with what the father had given him. At what group was this “barb” pointed? The Pharisees and Scribes might be an easy target for this accusation but, it has a broader inference. WE are the PRODIGAL as were the people who heard this parable. The “man had two sons” and we must ask ourselves, “Who am I in this story?” Are we the one who demanded his inheritance and then wasted it OR are we the one who stayed home and did as the father asked? Which son is the “hero” of this story? Which son is the “sore loser”? Read it again if it is not clear to you. On the surface, the story is very obvious or, is it? The “prodigal” went and “sowed his wild oats”, wasted what his father GAVE him and fell into misery and hunger. He ended up tending hogs, a “forbidden task” for any Jew, and coveting the pigs’ food. He “hit bottom” and became “lower than a snake’s navel in a wagon rut.” Is the point of “hitting bottom” that we have “no way to LOOK but UP”? Being destitute and hungry, he realized his mistake and did he envy his brother’s status

with the father? No, he just wanted to “go home” and be a slave because the state of a “slave” in his father’s house was better than his present condition. He KNEW he deserved no better than the lowest in the father’s “kingdom”. That is the same inference as described by the psalmist, isn’t it? “Better ONE DAY in your courts than a THOUSAND elsewhere.” Just being “in the Kingdom” in any position is better than the best state “outside the Kingdom”? He did not count on the love of the father and the forgiveness of the father. His “problem” was that he did not “understand the father”. Do we “understand” our Father and the LOVE of our Father? Thus, are we no different than the “prodigal son”? Our “ego”, our “self-interest”, our stiff necks keep us from accepting the Father’s love? I am the “prodigal son”. I think that is the POINT of Jesus’ parable. Can you identify with the “prodigal”? God has given us our inheritance that we did not deserve and we have squandered it. The Father is waiting to welcome us back into his Kingdom, give us back what we wasted and, because of our ATTITUDE of confession and desire for RECONCILIATION, God WANTS to restore our relationship. BUT, wait a minute; are we also the “second son”? The second son was NOT HAPPY that his brother had been FORGIVEN, RECONCILED TO THE FATHER and RESTORED, was he? He must have thought “What am I, sliced bread?” Don’t you just know the jealousy boiled in him? Why the anger? Was it because he realized that he, too, could have gotten the blessing of the Father, gone and sinned by squandering the inheritance and been FORGIVEN? Did he feel stupid that he had not “sown his wild oats”? Note that the “first son” was “grown-up” when he “sowed his wild oats” and squandered what was given to him. To me, it is great hope for those of us who are “born into Christ”, grow up and THEN “leave home” and wander away from God. The age of the sons is not mentioned because it was not germane to the parable. This could apply to people of any age. Surely some readers can identify with this? By our “leaving HOME”, we BECOME the “first son”. Was the “stay at home brother” secretly “jealous” of his prodigal brother? How can we use this parable in our lives? The Father was overjoyed that “what was LOST” had been “found”. His son was restored to his rightful place and the relationship restored. Again, WHO are you and I in this parable? Be honest and examine ourselves to see if we have ever “felt” like the second son. How do we feel when someone who has “squandered” the LOVE and blessing of God all their lives and, then, accepts God’s love and is forgiven? Do we feel somehow “cheated”? Do we feel “envious of their forgiveness”? Do we think, “IF only I had KNOWN that the Father would take me back AFTER I had done what I WANTED, I would have been a real sinner and “come home” at the end of my life”? Those who have “accepted salvation” early in life don’t realize that they have ALWAYS had the love of the Father and a relationship with the Father for most of their lives. Why would they “envy” those who live most of their lives separated from the Father? Jesus KNOWS us and our perverse lack of understanding of the Father’s love, forgiveness and desire to have a relationship with ALL OF HIS CHILDREN. The Pharisees and Scribes were “religious folks” who were given all the privileges of “being clergy” all their lives but “squandered their positions” for personal position and status. Were

they the “second son” or the first? ALL who have separated themselves from God could be likened to the “first son”. ALL who have “squandered” the love of God and have taken for granted the blessing of a relationship with the Father are BOTH SONS. With whom can you identify in this parable? A parable only makes sense when we can put ourselves into the narrative and identify with the characters. A parable INFERS a lesson without being “preachy”. The “work” of a parable is done in the crucible of the mind of the hearer. If your minister uses “parabolic teaching” to preach sermons in your hearing, you are most fortunate. If parables were the prime method used by Jesus, they are good enough for us. “Let him who has ears, HEAR.” IF we are safe in a relationship with the Father, STAY HOME. IF we are “lost” and have squandered our “inheritance”, God beckons us to COME BACK HOME. God is waiting to “kill the fatted calf” and welcome YOU and ME with open arms. That is God’s promise of love, acceptance and reconciliation. That is truly GOOD NEWS. COME HOME before you “go home”.