

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Joshua 5: 9 – 12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 21

Luke 15: 1 -3, 11b – 32

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"You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." So says George Webber, the protagonist in Thomas Wolfe's 1940 novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*.

George, a novice author, writes a best-selling book that makes frequent references to his hometown and the people who were his neighbors and family and friends. That success is wonderful for George's career, but it makes him very unpopular in his old stomping grounds because the people consider it to be a less-than-attractive portrayal of who they are and where they live. So much so that some of them send him death threats. So George really *can't* go home again, at least not without facing the wrath and ire of the townsfolk.

The idea that "you can't go home again" has resonated so deeply with us that it has become a catchphrase, a cliché, and perhaps rightly so. Any of us who have ever returned to places where we have lived and moved and had our being for any significant period of our lives have experienced that shift from what we remember to what has changed. We can't go back to the way it was, for good or for ill. And yet, several of today's lessons tell us that we really can return home, and know it again for the first time, to borrow another literary metaphor, this time from T. S. Eliot.

The Israelites, under the authority of Joshua, are encamped in Gilgal. Except for Joshua, Moses and the whole generation that made the Exodus out of Egypt have died. A new generation, born during the wandering in the Wilderness, has grown up, and all along, God, has been their refuge and strength. God has now led the Israelites safely through the waters of the Jordan River into the land promised to their ancestors. For the first time in a very long time, the people of God do not eat manna. They eat the crops grown in the land of Canaan. They have found refuge. They are home. Home in God, and home in Canaan.

The psalmist, too, expresses the emotions of a homecoming. Of returning to God in a refuge of forgiveness. In a refuge of belonging. "You are my hiding place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance," cries the psalmist. The psalmist's words could well be the words of the Israelites as they settle down in the home God has provided for them. As could Paul's in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he entreats the Corinthians to come home to God, to be reconciled with God.

Then we get to one of the most well-known stories of all time. We know it as the story of the Prodigal Son, but to call it that makes it lopsided and takes the focus off of the center of the story, the father. A father who has two sons. This story is more appropriately called the Parable of the Prodigal

Father, prodigal meaning “recklessly extravagant.” It is the Parable of the Father who loves both of his sons with reckless extravagance.

This is the third in a series of three parables that Jesus tells, all of which have to do with recovering things that have been lost – a coin, a sheep, and a son. Jesus tells these stories in response to the Pharisees and scribes who get on his case about eating and drinking with disreputable tax collectors and sinners. Jesus’ critics apparently feel that they are secure, blameless, righteous and definitely not lost. Parables are about laying two things alongside each other and comparing them. All three parables say something about how God searches for and rejoices in finding that which had gone missing, that which was lost.

We tend to miss the absolute insult in the younger son’s request to his father and in his actions. In a culture where land is the very livelihood of existence and identity (as with Joshua and the Israelites), where property is received in trust from one’s forebears, taken care of and given in trust to the next generation, where honor is everything, this is a huge affront. It is as if the younger son comes up and spits in his father’s face and says, “I wish you were dead!” It is that harsh. He is breaking faith with his father, as well as with the surrounding community and his whole faith tradition. But he couldn’t care less. He’s only thinking about himself – what he *wants* rather than what he *needs*, what he hopes for rather than what is. He thinks nothing of the relationship with his father, his brother or anyone else. He is only focused on having the family farm in the rearview mirror and becoming who he wants to be.

The father grants his younger son’s request. To do so flies in the face of all reason and tradition. But sometimes, that’s what prodigal love, recklessly extravagant love, does. The father not only goes ahead and divides the property between his sons, he allows the younger son to sell the property and cash it out so he can hurry down the road with shekels jingling in his pocket. It must be a huge embarrassment for the father among his neighbors and kinfolk. Not only is it as if the father has died, it is also as if the son has died. He has disassociated himself from everything and everyone, and gone off to a far-away, Gentile land, presumably never to be heard from again.

The younger son’s plans don’t turn out quite as he had hoped that they would. “He comes to himself,” the scriptures say. The crisis of starvation brings him to his senses. Wallowing in pig muck, his stomach grumbling, he realizes all that he has thrown away. We don’t really know whether it’s the boy’s stomach or his heart talking when he decides to return home, but we do know that he is desperate. Desperate enough to eat crow, which would probably taste pretty good to him right about now.

I suspect that the father has been looking for his younger son to return every day since he first disappeared into the sunset. And on this day, the father looks up from his sheep to see a figure on the horizon. He would know that gait, anywhere. It may not be as swaggering as it used to be, but he knows it as well as he knows his own name. His lined, sun-beaten face breaks into the broadest of grins and he lets out a whoop! Unlike any other respectable man of his age and wealth, not only does he whoop for joy, he begins to run. He runs as fast as his flowing robes and sandals and age will allow – arms outstretched in a wide embrace to catch the figure coming slowly toward him.

The son, lost in his thoughts, perhaps contrite and deeply embarrassed, his eyes downcast and his chin on his chest, is unaware of the homecoming approaching him. Only when he hears the slapping of the sandals hitting the dirt and the walloping of the robes in the breeze, only then does the younger son realize that an oh-so-familiar voice is calling out to him. Only then does he look up into the best thing he has ever seen. The son is home, and he knows it again for the first time.

The son begins his well-rehearsed speech, only his father is far too jubilant to hear it, and far too busy giving directions to the wine steward and the keeper of the flocks, and sending for his best robe and ring. There must be a celebration! The returning son is to be welcomed with the most glorious of feasts in a recklessly extravagant kind of way.

Is it the aroma of veal roasting on a spit, or the sounds of merrymaking that first get the attention of the older son out in the field? Wondering what all the commotion is about, the older son heads towards the house. When a servant tells him, the older son refuses to set foot in the house. No one has asked him if he wants to be reconciled with his wastrel of a brother. No one has asked him if he wants to share the rest of his inheritance with this profligate sibling. He has done everything right; he has behaved honorably and faithfully to his father. And he isn't about to go in and make nice with his father's other son. He can't even bring himself to use the word "brother." His refusal to accept his father's hospitality is nearly as large an insult as that of the younger son. And in this moment of anger and resentment and frustration, the older son is as lost as the younger son ever was.

Just as he did with his younger son, the prodigal father comes out to meet his first born son. His recklessly extravagant love reaches out to this son, too, seeking him, inviting him, reassuring him. He wants his older son to come home, but just as with the other one, he can't force him, and we are left to think about how it might end.

Jesus' meaning in this parable seems to be pretty clear. God is a God of recklessly extravagant love. A God who will never force us to receive the grace – the mercy, the acceptance, the welcome, the refuge, the home – that awaits us in God. In the words of one writer, Oliver McTernan, God's love is a love that allows us space to make mistakes, a love that is not possessive, jealous or intrusive. But just as with the father who runs out to embrace each of his sons, God is not indifferent to our plight. Whatever our condition, McTernan writes, whether it is self-induced through ignorance or arrogance, we remain loveable in the eyes of a God who is always ready to embrace us unconditionally and to welcome us home. A very good thought for us in the fourth week of Lent. +