

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington DC
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Home

Text: St. Mark 6:1-13

“Home is where the heart is.” That is a lovely notion, especially when the home one is talking about is located somewhere in the central part of the great state of Nostalgia. We have all, I think, experienced it. Sometimes it comes upon us when we are in a foreign land, and we hear our national anthem being played. Our eyes well up. It comes upon us, too, when we are far from home and miss those we love who are not present to us, and miss everything that made our life comfortable and ours. It comes upon us also when we think of long ago times, times of childhood and youth, in places more innocent, less pressured, with real friends and genuine values, places where we set up lemonade stands, and neighbors knew the kids next door and watched out for them if they continued playing in the street past dark.

But home is a lot more complicated than nostalgia lets on. Garrison Keillor, for example, some years ago wrote a short piece about his home in St. Paul. He described the neighborhood he lived in at the time, Crocus Hill. He wrote that as he walked through the neighborhood, and as he went by the houses and waved at people in their yards, he felt like if he ever had a problem, any one of them might say, “Come in. Have some coffee. Tell me about it. Don’t feel bad.” Now since I grew up in that neighborhood, I am guessing that Keillor was only speculating, and that he hadn’t actually been invited in anywhere. I knew the people he was talking about, and they were not given to inviting strangers in. But I get his point; Minnesotans as a whole like to be thought of in the way he wrote about them. But Keillor also went on to talk about how, although these people there were friendly and supportive enough when you had a problem, they also tended to

be pretty critical when you did something unusual that made you stick out. Truth of the matter is that Keillor had a particular problem at that time which was the intense interest people developed in his personal life after his radio program “A Prairie Home Companion” made him famous, and even landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine. Like many great performers, Keillor is an introvert, and when off stage needs to shut the attention off. When that didn’t happen, he became testy. And indeed, the St. Paul papers, *The Pioneer Press and Dispatch*, first irritated him and then got very critical when he publicly complained about their reporting, and then on the national airwaves renamed them the *St. Paul Pioneer Gas and Distress*. Fortunately, in the subsequent years, Keillor has made peace with home, and is its great celebrant now.

But again, I know the phenomenon he is talking about. I lived in the Midwest long enough to realize that in small towns in Minnesota or Iowa or Illinois, people are incredibly forgiving and supportive of others, and particularly of those who grew up there. On the other hand, they don’t particularly cotton to those who stick out. I remember meeting somebody at a party in St. Paul who came from Hibbing, Minnesota and who had been a high school classmate of the man we know as Bob Dylan. She assured me, however, that back in Hibbing he was still just Bobby Zimmerman. This, I suspect, explains why Bob hasn’t bothered to go back since he headed down Route 61 to Minneapolis over forty years ago.

But it isn’t just the Midwest. The East coast has its problems with home, too. After watching students and parents in Illinois poke back in any thumb that stuck out – if the thumb didn’t just plain leave first -- I have noted that among the upper middle class on the East Coast that one is expected to excel; for example, it seems to be drilled into the minds of high school students that your entire life rests on the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking of the college you go to; later on, everybody seems to know just what the ranking system of particular job titles is.

Well, good. Kids need to be pushed a bit, and we need to push ourselves. But I have also noted how emotionally unsupportive people are of those who don't excel or those who choose the unusual in life. I have noted how dependent the ambitious are on external validation, and how in a way, how very *common* the measure is that they use for that validation. In their own way, they, too, push others right back into a common mold, and care little about one's inner life. No wonder people keep moving to California. It has its own problems but it also has the advantage of being on the other coast.

But perhaps the problem with homes is eternal. Jesus certainly had a problem with his. Soon after he began his ministry, he returned home. He had healed people up and down the land of Israel; he had God's voice boom out over him at his baptism, saying, "This is my Son." The folks back home didn't care, though. He taught in the local synagogue and they wondered where he got all this *stuff*. "Isn't he the carpenter's boy?" they asked. They had his number. And so it is said, plainly and simply, "they took offense at him."

Jesus for his part hardly seemed thrilled by the visit, either. It is said he couldn't do any deeds of power there, and was amazed at their unbelief. Later, when he sent out the disciples to teach in the villages all around, he seems to have had this hometown experience in mind when he told them that "if a place doesn't welcome you, well, then, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." I have heard ministers disappointed with their congregations suggest that since Christ commanded it, perhaps this should be viewed as a third sacrament.

Yet, the difficulty is not always with the place we have come from. A lot of the time the problem is with us; we are the ones who created the friction in the first place, and not for reasons of sticking out by virtue of excellence. Jesus himself knew that, and told the story of the prodigal son to illustrate it. The difficulty that the prodigal had in going home was that he knew he had

pretty much poisoned all the relations he had with people there.

The American novelist, Marilyn Robinson tells just such a story in her recent novel *Home*. It is the story of an aged and retired Presbyterian minister and his family and home in Gilead, Iowa. His youngest daughter, Glory, has come home, although it was never her plan to do so. But after she was jilted by the man who promised to marry her, and after it became clear that somebody had to take care of the Rev. Boughton, and as she now had no plans of her own, there was little choice but to come back to the old house. Like it or not, she knew she would stay. Her life would end where it started.

She is not the only one to return. Her middle brother, Jack, also returns home. He has not been back in over twenty years. It is not exactly clear what he has been up to during this time, since he hasn't communicated, but there is no doubt that his has not been a productive life and that his life probably has included prison. Trouble while he was in Gilead, he left shortly town after he got a girl pregnant, leaving her and the baby, who died not long afterwards. The guilt that should have been his, became his family's. Yet, he returns. It seems he would like to make peace with his past, but he is constantly at odds with his surroundings and with his traditionalist minister father, even though he is Boughton's favorite child.

Although he manages to form a new bond with his kid sister Glory and even with his godfather, the Rev. John Ames, his father's best friend, his godfather and one of his chief critics, Jack is restless, anxious and with more than a touch of self-loathing, as is the case with many alcoholics. He is guilty and while he would like home to be his refuge, he can't help but feel his guilt more even intensely while there. He is always getting ready to leave again, and in the end he does. But as his father's health worsens, and he slides into dementia it becomes clear that there is no possibility of finally ironing out differences before he does leave. That reconciliation is not

what the story is about; the story is not a new casting of the story of the prodigal son.

Instead, it is about what home is and means, even for those who seem exiled from it. That becomes clear at the very end of the book when Jack has left again. Two days after he has gone, a car with two women and a young boy pull up to the house. They were unusual visitors for there were no colored people in Gilead. But it turns out that one of the women, Della, is Jack's wife, a woman that he had been waiting for while in Gilead, and to whom he had sent many desperate letters. Her family, also a minister's family, had wanted her to have no part of him, though. The boy, Robert, is Jack's son, named after his grandfather, the Rev. Robert Boughton.

The three visitors cannot stay long. But after they leave, Glory is set to thinking about what it meant to have them in Gilead and what they saw. She thought to herself: "Della had looked at the world of Jack's old life tenderly, all the particulars there to confirm themselves, proof of Jack's truthfulness, which always did need proof." And she thought about some things Jack had said: " 'I used to live here, I wasn't always gone, I was usually closer to home than the Rev. thought I was.' So Jack had said, and how could he have seemed so estranged from them? And how cruel it was that he loved the place anyway." And then she thought about Jack's son: "His little boy touching that old climbing tree, just to touch it... 'I used to wish I lived here' the boy had said."

Then she thought to herself, "Maybe this Robert will come back someday...What of Jack will there be in him? And I will be almost old. I will see him standing in the road by the oak tree, and I will know him by his tall man's slouch, the hands on the hips. I will invite him onto the porch... And he will be very kind to me. He will be curious about the place, though his curiosity will not override his good manners. He will talk to me a little while, too shy to tell me why he has come, and then he will thank me and leave, walking backward a few steps, thinking, 'Yes,

the barn is still there, yes, the lilacs, even the pot of petunias. This was my father's house.' And I will think, 'He is young. He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment.

“That he has answered his father's prayers.

“The Lord is wonderful.”

Home is sometimes simply a matter of nostalgia; sometimes it is a difficult place that is even alienating; we can't get away from it fast enough to flourish. But home is also a place, although we may have exiled ourselves from it, where we are rooted. We draw our children's attention to it, and even if we have failed to live up to expectations, the memory of a real home is also the promise of what our children can become. It is what they – and we – can touch, to know who one is and where one is coming from. And, it can therefore even give us a sense of where we might be going, or at least what it means to go somewhere.

On a weekend when we celebrate the nation that is our home, it is important to know that. Sometimes we get sentimental about our homeland. Sometimes we get combative about it, and try to exile those who are unusual and different or force them into a mold. Sometimes we are alienated from it, and disappointed by it, and wish it were or had been something else than it is. Sometimes, we think of the missed opportunities we had with respect to this home. But still it is our home; it is where we have come from, and it has shaped us, for better or worse. We are who we are because of it, and so much of what we care about is somehow connected to it.

But if this is important to recognize about the nation, it is even more important to recognize this sort of thing about our true and everlasting home. Plato was insistent that our true home was not here in this world, not in any nation, but somewhere else, somewhere beyond the skies. Jesus insisted on the same thing. He kept telling people about the kingdom of God, and he sent out his disciples to tell them about it. Later on, in response, Christians would describe

themselves as resident aliens, as sojourners, in the lands where they lived, for their real home was God's kingdom. Now, perhaps when Jesus talked about the kingdom, he was telling them something new, but in another way, I think, he was also reminding them of the God from whom they had come; he was reminding them of home.

Even if we have exiled ourselves by sin and guilt from that real home, I think that there may well be something that remains in our memory about it. It comes out in our hopes when we teach our children. It is what we hope *we* can finally be reconciled to, and it is a place where we hope we can find peace of the deepest sort. We can hope for that because of the one who came from there to remind us that home has always been there, and to lead us back to it.

Let us now find a foretaste of that peace and that place by partaking of the fruits of the land of our real home, even the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, he who is our hope, our peace, and our life, our beginning and our end.