

“You Can’t Go Home Again”

Returning to your hometown after years away at college or in the military can be disconcerting. Family and friends still have the image of you as someone fresh out of high school. They have no way of knowing how you have changed in your time away. You on the other hand feel like you have changed. The person that has developed over your time away is different. You know who your new self is, but how do you communicate it? That probably requires a sit-down and a long talk. Of course, the reverse is also true, your family and friends have also changed in your time away. Their changes may not be as dramatic as yours, but they are there, nonetheless. These renewed connections can be fraught and a bit awkward.

I recall returning home to Fredericksburg, after twenty-five years away. In the interim I had finished college, earned an MBA from Cornell, been married and divorced, and worked in a variety of industries including museums, guitar making, gourmet food and wine, market research, and for the Discovery Channel. I was no longer the young man who was best known as Gene’s son or Lil’ Gene. I even pronounced my surname differently than how it was pronounced in Fredericksburg. Some people thought that I was putting on airs using the French pronunciation.

While my homecoming was a little complicated, my personal changes and experiences opened new pathways for me. There were new people in town who did not peg me with my history as a child of my father. Some people who knew me as a youngster, were open to seeing me as my own man. I was able to do things in town that the younger me, had he never left, would not have been able to do.

In today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel Jesus experiences an interesting homecoming. First, it is important to note that the reason that Jesus is “filled with the power of the Spirit” is that he has gone through some changes himself. He completed his forty days in the desert following his baptism. As part of that sojourn, he resisted the three temptations of the devil i.e., turning stones into bread, worshipping Satan, and testing God. Since then, he has been teaching in the synagogues throughout his home region of Galilee. Then he decides to return to his hometown.

Luke makes it clear that Nazareth was, “where [Jesus] had been brought up.” That is, this is the town where he has been known since he was a boy. The people of Nazareth know his parents and his brothers and sisters. Unlike in other towns from which reports “about him spread through all the surrounding region” these people know Jesus and have certain expectations of him. They might have a hard time accepting the Jesus who is rabbi, preacher, teacher, and miracle worker.

Yet after Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” When he tells them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” they do not recoil. Rather, Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But then doubt starts to creep in when some say, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” There is the thought among some of them that Jesus has “gotten above his raising” as the saying goes.

As if he has heard the murmuring start, he anticipates that they want him that to perform a miracle for them. But he points out that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” That is disturbing enough, but he reminds them that the most beloved prophets Elijah and Elisha performed their most famous miracles outside of Israel, specifically in Sidon and Syria. It is not hard to see why the people of Nazareth could

turn so quickly against Jesus. There was an expectation that this local boy would do something special for his hometown. Instead, he tells them that those most deserving of mercy are people they do not even like and who worship a different god. This would be hard to hear from anyone, but it is intolerable coming from someone who is one of them.

Preaching The Good News is a tricky thing. First, there are many people who think The Good News is there to confirm what they already believe. They want to have their life affirmed. I saw a quote this week that read in part, “[Many] people go to church to be assured that they are good people who are part of a mostly good enough system...They don’t want to follow Jesus. They want Jesus to follow them and whisper, ‘You’re doing fine. You don’t need to change. I have the same enemies as you do.’” I do not think this is unique for the church. Most organizations are groups of people who want to feel good about who they are. We want and need affirmation, but religion should not work like a club.

Religion, certainly Christianity, is about being challenged to be better people. As a friend of mine wrote, “Christianity is, at its best, an aspirational religion.” It is not a faith that makes us comfortable as we are. It is a faith that dares us to be more caring, compassionate, loving, and embracing of outsiders. Jesus calls us to love one another as we love ourselves.¹ Jesus tells us that our neighbor, the one who saves our life, may just be the one we think is our enemy.² He teaches that the way to eternal life in God is to give away our possessions and follow him in a life of poverty.³ He teaches us that only the sinless can cast the first stone at another sinner.⁴ He gives his life for us because that is what love does.⁵

A famous saying often used to describe preaching is to, “Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This may seem a bit perverse. If we think we are in the comfortable category we can be outraged. If we feel afflicted, we could feel smugly reassured. The truth is more complex. For at any time we can be comfortable or afflicted. Indeed, most of the time we are both. A rich person may be comfortable in her living situation, but be afflicted by disease, family discord, or pangs of conscience. A person afflicted by poverty may find comfort in family, friends, church, or the arts.

A good preacher should never be content comforting or afflicting. It is the preacher’s job to be constantly striving to share the Good News of Jesus so that it motivates his or her congregation. The Good News is not a self-help course, nor is it a set of affirmations. The Gospel of Christ is a challenge to live a life that is God-centered instead of self-centered. It is easier said than done. That is why we come back every week to be supported and reinforced.

The challenge is there for us to accept. To preach a full-throated Gospel and to take on the challenge of being the Good News to others. To dare to say **of** ourselves, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

¹ Matthew 22:39

² Luke 10:25-37

³ Mark 10:17-31

⁴ John 8:1-11

⁵ John 15:13