

Mark 6:1-13

Strangers in a Familiar Land
July 5, 2015

Thomas Wolfe was probably right. He is credited with coining the phrase “You Can’t Go Home Again.” It was the title of his last novel, published in 1940, two years after his death. In the novel, George Webber, a writer, publishes a book that includes a number of not-so-flattering references to his home town...and Webber starts getting hate mail from his childhood friends and acquaintances, learning that, indeed, he can’t go home again because he will not be welcome.

Jesus tries to go home again in today’s text. Home was Nazareth. In Jesus’ day Nazareth was what today we might call a one-stop-sign town. Only one main road, not even important enough for a stop light. Depending on the ancient historian you talk to, there were either about 500 residents or a bit less than 2000. Regardless, anyway you look at it Nazareth was a very small town.

And the Jesus, who returns, is very different from the Jesus who left. Back home they remember him as a construction worker. For centuries we’ve called him a “carpenter” and it sounds so much more, I don’t know, noble a profession, but the Greek word is the one used to describe brick layers, iron workers...people who do the grunt work of building.

And so the construction worker stands up in temple on the Sabbath and begins to read and interpret scripture and the whispers begin.

“Who does he think he is?”

“Did you hear what they said he did in Capernaum? Forgiving sins? Blasphemy?”

“He didn’t have all these high and mighty opinions when he was a raggedy little boy running around after his construction-worker father. Get him?”

That’s the popular version of interpretation of today’s text. That closed-minded folks couldn’t see the Jesus he had become because they remembered the Joshua he had been....

But I wonder if it’s more like the Thomas Wolfe novel than we’d like to admit...because...most of the time, going home for many of us isn’t like this at all. Is it?

Going home usually means being welcomed and praised...whether you deserve it or not, doesn’t it? Oh, sure, Dad might object to what you’ve done with your hair or the career that you’ve chosen, and Mom would rather not know about the new tattoo or the details of your night life, but going home is usually much safer, isn’t it? Particularly for the neighbors.

A few years ago, I was headed home for a post-Christmas visit with my family, and my stay was going to include the last Sunday of the year. The church I called home during my legal years...was in the midst of an interim

period....someone knew I would be in town and they asked if I would preach, as the interim and the associate were to be gone that Sunday.

I said sure. And so I preached. And no one stood up and said...hey who does he think he is...no one got offended...instead....they all said it was wonderful...and truth be told, I could have gotten up and read the phone book and they probably would have said the same thing. I was that nice young man who use to sing in the choir and write melodramas for the church retreat....it may well be that some of them did hear what I had to say that day...but I'm willing to bet that for a lot of them, it was a chance to welcome home a member of the family...like we are welcoming Iain home today with Dana and Ella.

I want to suggest that the reason Jesus doesn't get that kind of welcome in Nazareth is because he has been systematically making every one with power, everyone who might judge little Nazareth for the perceived sins of her now most favorite son....angry.

We like to think of Jesus as the ultimate figure of benevolence—a rebel with a cause, who traveled around the country healing the sick, standing with the oppressed, and speaking truth to power so eloquently that they changed their ways over night...I mean after all...he's God personified right?

But then again there is that nasty reality that all of this is leading to his execution...and already, here, near the very beginning of his ministry, he's making the powers that be nervous and a bit furious. He purports to forgive sins...the temple practices of his day have a very elaborate series of steps that need to be undertaken for freedom from one's prior sins....and this construction worker dares to just tell people they are forgiven. He and his followers have even healed people on the Sabbath...against the rules. He and his followers aren't seeing to their responsibilities to their families....and besides, we all know that those healer types all dabble in idol worship and black magic, right?

Everything he is doing is going to make the powers that be....from the temple to the palace in Jerusalem to the Roman centurions in Caesarea...ANGRY... And who will they punish, who will they blame? Surely this Jesus is going to make THEM look bad.

He's a disgrace to Nazareth...and they make sure to knock him right off that high horse they see him on as he rises to speak in the synagogue. So he leaves...oh, being Jesus, he tends to a few sick folk on his way out of town, but he leaves.

And immediately afterwards he sends out the disciples on their first summer mission trip together. He pairs them off and sends them out to proclaim repentance and forgiveness and to heal the sick (the very things that got him in deep trouble back home).

Did you notice what he has them carry? “Nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.” a staff, sandals and a single tunic.

For those who Mark was writing to, that list it going to make them sit up and take notice and nod their heads knowingly. Way back in what we now call Exodus, that’s exactly what the Israelites who are fleeing the oppression of Pharaoh are told to take with them into the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land. They had been freed by the power of Yahweh acting through Moses, and they were now to head out in complete dependence on God.

Now, Jesus is sending his friends out on a missionary journey with just the same...making them totally dependent on God and the kindness of strangers.

The imagery of Jesus’ instructions is filled with these hints about dependence on hospitality.

That line about shaking the dust off of your feet of the ones who will not listen to you? It’s an implied curse on people for their lack of hospitality. In the ancient world where there are no hotels and no YMCA’s, no rest station wash rooms...when a traveler passed by your home...the custom was to invite them in...offer them food and water, perhaps a place to rest for the night...and...to wash their feet. Covered practically from head to ankle much of the time...the feet were the most consistently dirty part of any person...and washing of feet was the sign of welcome.

Jesus sends out his disciples and says...do not stay where you are not wanted...having just experienced that himself. Jesus seemed to know that those who do not want to hear you will not hear you...even those who once loved you as a neighbor and friend. It’s as though he is preparing the disciples for the rejection that is coming. If they keep preaching their message of forgiveness, of dependence on God and not Rome or the temple or the puppet kingdom of Herod....pretty soon, all of Israel is going to be like Nazareth for all of them...a place where they are not welcome, a place that is afraid to have them around...because they aren’t afraid to rock the boat.

It’s a daunting task sometimes...inside this beautiful space, alongside our friends, in the midst of this amazing community that is so progressive and welcoming that the awesome small town fourth of July parade was also a tribute to the unabashedly liberal character of Evanston...it’s a daunting task to realize that we are heirs of that little community of rebels who were sent out two-by-two -- with one staff, one pair of sandals and one cloak....totally dependent on God...and the kindness of strange -- to proclaim a word of hope to the hopeless....a word of challenge to those of power and wealth....a word of deliverance to saint and sinner alike through, what for them, was the good news at the time....repent...change your heart and your ways...and seek the way of God...the way of justice, peace, fairness, obedience to a set of principles that could be summarized as love God, love neighbor, love self.

This is the legacy into which we will welcome little Ella in just a few minutes. For if it is anything at all, Baptism is the announcement that we are claimed by God as beloved and holy, but we are also commissioned by God as ministers of what is Good News for us—that in his self-giving death and resurrection—however we might understand that....God in Christ announces that the death dealing powers of the world have lost—all of those systems and structures that separate us from one another and from God...all of those wrongs and omissions that poison our relationships with one another, with God, with our best selves....NONE of those things will have ultimate power...but grace and love and life will, in the end, prevail.

For some that is foolishness...and for many it's a threat. Dependent on God and the hospitality of strangers alone? Well then you won't need that mountain of things the world is selling us to separate us from one another, or to make us feel better about ourselves or superior to others....and we won't be heeding the words of leaders who turn our honorable patriotism into idolatrous worship of their power and influence just so we can feel safe or powerful or Number One....and we won't obsess about the fearful "other" who lives on the "wrong" side of this border or that part of town or whose skin is a different color, or whose accent or language is different from our own.

It's as though Jesus uses this first little journey as training for the road ahead that will be much more difficult...standing up to....and proclaiming—in word and deed—an alternative to the dominant culture of fear, intimidation, scarcity, greed and power.

Rationally and emotionally, we followers of this construction worker, who was a disgrace in his own home town, know that love is better than hate...that peace is better than war...that equality is better than oppressive power politics. But, what makes our message different is that we proclaim that all of those sources of division and oppression have already lost, even if they don't know it. That love and grace have already won...and we will confidently, but humbly, live as though that is true, where we can...making it a reality that all can see.

Can we start like the disciples? Together going on a journey...not alone...but with one another...and with the Spirit of the Christ who sends us...taking the first steps by going out into the world—living and speaking the Good News that will carry little Ella and us all our day? Sure, there are those who won't want to hear it...who may think us mad or silly or delusional...but we aren't engaged in a popularity contest for us or for God...but we are, all of us, on little daily mission trips of love and grace and healing. And along the way, we are promised...that there are those who want, who need, who would love to hear and see and join their hospitality with ours as together we each live into our baptisms...as together we live into the hope of a love so great that it can change the world one moment, one heart, one step at a time.