

You Can Go Home Again

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 13, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

(Luke 15:1-10, NRSV)

As some of you know, one of those novels of the last century that left a deep impression on me was *You Can't Go Home Again*, written by Asheville, North Carolina-born writer Thomas Wolfe and posthumously published in 1940. It's the story of a young, up-and-coming writer named George Webber who himself writes a book which frequently – and negatively – references his hometown of Libya Hill. When the residents of Libya Hill read the book and see the way Webber describes the people and happenings of their beloved town, they begin sending him angry letters and even death threats. (Ironically, everyone *else* in the *rest* of the country loves the book!).

Wolfe's title, *You Can't Go Home Again*, comes from the end of the novel when Webber realizes "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 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."

You Can't Go Home Again. It's more than just the title of an 80-year old story. One may find in that poignant title an expression of something so many know very intimately – a sense of lostness, of living in *exile* ... in exile from a place called *home*.

Home. That word may conjure up Christmas mornings of yesteryear, opening presents under the loving watch of family now passed. Or it could take you back to days of laughter and imagination in play with the friends of childhood. But going beyond the nostalgia and the memories of old, familiar faces, *home* was that place – if ever there *was* such a place – where you felt safe ... where you loved and you were loved.

Home is a place to which we would long to *return*. And yet, it's more than this too. For Frederick Buechner, "home" has a *twofold* meaning: the home you might *remember* and the home you *dream of*. It's a place which lies in the past, but it's *also* a place of the soul, which you long to experience ... which you hope one day to find ... a place where you feel you *belong* and that in some sense belongs to *you*.

You know, many people spend their entire lives trying to find that place.

In our gospel reading for this Sunday, we hear Jesus talking about lost things – a lost sheep, a lost coin. These parables immediately precede that most famous parable of all, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in which a younger son leaves home with his inheritance and squanders it on wild living, until he had nothing left. And we know that in his destitution he comes to his senses and decides to return home. And of course, his longsuffering, loving Father awaits him there, and welcomes him back with open arms.

But *these* parables are different. The Prodigal Son was almost *looking* to get lost, but he always knew the way back when or if he was ready to return. But you can't exactly say that about the sheep or the coin, can you? Sheep and coins get lost in other ways – ways we might understand all too well.

With sheep, they can get lost in a "dumb" sort of way. We know that they're not the sharpest knives in the drawer of the animal kingdom. Truth be told, it's their thoughtless pursuit of their *appetite* that can get them lost ... They can quite literally nibble their way into being lost, never looking up as they follow greener and greener grass, and wander and wander further away. If it does that long enough, a sheep can find itself isolated from the flock. The poor thing doesn't *mean* to get lost, but in its single-minded pursuit of something it wants, it can suddenly find itself alone in a vulnerable place and not at all know the way back to safety.

Coins get lost in another way. Someone handling loose change may not notice one coin slip out of their pocket as they reach in to count it or to pay for an ice cream cone. Now, in biblical times, at least among the poor, the loss of a coin – a silver coin at that – *would* be noticed. Scholars say that the coin in the parable would have been a denarius, the equivalent of a day's wages for a laborer – not something to ignore – and thus, the woman's diligent search to find it.

But these days, let a penny or a dime slip out, let it roll or bounce across a floor, or into the grass, or on to the street ... and it's gone. Such coins are not lost on purpose, of course, but their being lost is usually not noticed, and these days, even if the loss is noticed, they're usually not sought after.

Jesus knows that there are many ways to get lost. We may, like the prodigal son, almost *try* to get lost for whatever reason, and then one day, hit rock bottom and feel the longing for home. Or we may, like a sheep, not mean to get lost, but chase after things which we think will make us happy or complete us, and then one day, find that we *are* lost ... that we're separated from

that place of love, safety, and belonging – and that we don't know how or where we would find it again. Or we may in the course of life, like loose coins, simply be dropped, mishandled, and fall to the ground useless and forgotten. This may be the worst lost-ness of all, when you're lost and others don't seem to care or even notice that you're missing.

Perhaps you understand because you've been there, or you look on helplessly as one you love wanders aimlessly without peace. Perhaps you understand how for you, or for a loved one, that place of safety and belonging is nowhere to be found ... its space filled by desperation, or by bitterness, or by a deep sense of worthlessness from having been discarded by those who were supposed to love you.

But just because you don't know your direction, doesn't mean you don't have one. All three of these parables ... of the Prodigal Son, of the Lost Sheep, of the Lost Coin ... speak into this lostness, pain, and longing, a word of defiant hope. There is rejoicing at the end of all three when that which has been lost is *found*! They speak of *homecoming* ... Though there are many ways in which we wander astray or may find ourselves adrift, in the midst of all our trials and our hurts, there is a place where those failures are forgiven, those trials can be endured, those wounds can be healed – all covered by a Love which overcomes everything.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son rightly reminds us that God is always awaiting our return home with open arms. But these lesser-known parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin witness to something still more: to a God who does *more* than wait. In these stories Jesus tells us that there is a God who *comes out* to seek and save the lost, and so, we *can* go home again.

God knows us, knows our hiding places, knows the things that draw us away, knows all the cracks and crevices into which we can fall, and *God acts*. It is *God's* initiative. God is ever coming out to meet us where we are, and save us, and bring us home.

We Presbyterians have always emphasized the priority of *God's* grace, *God's* action, in our theology, but it all gets real when we look deeply, when we remember how we came to faith, how we came to experience a place called home. Perhaps we spent many years looking far and wide, but we found God's Love *because this Love first found us*.

And here, in this community of Jesus-followers, we are living into this truth. We *know* we are, because we have felt Christ's embrace in the love we share with one another ... when our hearts have swollen with praise ... when the scriptures are read and the Word proclaimed ... when we have been challenged to look beyond our present circumstances and to see our lives in a larger light. In all these ways and others, we come home more and more to who we are and who we're meant to be.

But as we also learn, God bringing us home is only the beginning. There is *being brought home*, but there is also *being sent forth from home*. Home is not just an end – it's also a *beginning*. On a literal level, we already know this. Home is the place to which we return at the end of a

workday, but the morning comes, and we leave home again, secure in its blessings, to go back out and do what we are meant to do in this world.

And so, in the same way, Love brings us to our truest Home, but not so we can keep it to ourselves, but so we can *share* it. And in this sharing, we live into our deepest and fullest identity in God – as those *beloved* of God and *sent by* God to find and gather *others* Home, that they too might know the belovedness that is their birthright.

We do this when we reach out into this community and minister to others with Christ's compassion. We do this when we extend the hand of welcome to a stranger. We do this when we feed the hungry or lend our time to help a struggling family. We do this when we pray with the sick, or truly forgive someone who doesn't deserve it. We do this when we put our heart into doing anything for others with passion and with love.

In all of these things, we are sharing something wonderful, the greatest good news that there is in this world: that you *can* go home again – to the glory of God! Amen.