

**Holy Restlessness (Summer Saints Series: George Herbert)**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 14, 2024**  
**Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Then Jesus said: There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So, he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.*

*Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:11-32, NRSV)*

One of the highlights of my young life, as a teenager in a large church youth group, was going to a Christian conference at Jekyll Island, Georgia. This was about 1985. It was called the "Fun in the Son" conference ("Son" spelled with an "o" rather than a "u"). Despite the mildly hokey name, it wasn't kidding with the special music and speaking guests that it brought in. One in particular stood out: Kerry Livgren ... Do any of you know who that is?

Kerry Livgren was the lead guitarist for the classic rock band “Kansas,” and wrote and played one of the most memorable guitar riffs in history with Kansas’ first great hit, “Carry On, Wayward Son.”

While Livgren has denied that the song was originally and primarily inspired by the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is true that he became a deeply committed Christian only about two years after writing it, and so in a way, the song both expresses the message of this great parable and itself is fulfilled in the subsequent shape of Livgren’s own life.

No doubt, the song - and the parable - give voice to that holy restlessness that stirs a young person to rebel, to leave an ordered place of safety and convention, while also poignantly giving voice to that Grace which awaits the weary wanderer when their struggle comes to an end:

*Carry on, my wayward son  
There'll be peace when you are done  
Lay your weary head to rest  
Don't you cry no more.*

It is exactly this spirit, this deep embrace of a divine Love which is patient and gentle, which enlivens the verse of our final Summer Saint for this season. Sometimes (at least to me) It seems like we’ve only just gotten started, but we now approach the end of our series, and as always, it has been quite a journey! Today we conclude with the only non-American in this summer’s line-up: the 17th century Welsh poet George Herbert (1593-1633). For all his relative obscurity for most of us these days, he has long been a cherished figure in Christian literary history, celebrated as one the two towering figures of 17<sup>th</sup> century English literature – and one who offers us a deep well of living water that can satisfy our thirst still today.

George Herbert was born on April 3, 1593, in Montgomery, Wales, into a noble and prominent family. His father, Richard Herbert, was a member of parliament, and his mother, Magdalen, was a patron of poets and writers, including the famous John Donne. The early loss of his father in 1596 meant that George, along with his nine siblings, was raised primarily by his mother, who provided a strong, religious foundation that would deeply influence the future course of his life.

Herbert attended Westminster School and later Trinity College, Cambridge, where he excelled academically, earning himself a fellowship at the college in 1616. Initially, he appeared destined for a career in politics or academia, having been appointed as the university’s Public Orator in 1620, a position that involved crafting and delivering official statements and correspondence in Latin.

Later elected to Parliament, Herbert anticipated a distinguished career in politics and public service, but it was not to be. When King James I, some important patrons, and then finally his mother all died, he gave up his political ambitions at court and took a decisive turn towards the spiritual life and discerned a calling to the church and parish ministry. His friends objected,

suggesting that the life of a pastor was beneath his dignity and skills as a scholar and statesman. To this, Herbert replied,

*It hath been formerly judged that the domestic servants of the King of Heaven should be of the noblest families on earth. And though the iniquity of the late times have made clergymen meanly valued, and the sacred name of priest contemptible; yet I will labour to make it honourable, by consecrating all my learning, and all my poor abilities to advance the glory of that God that gave them ... And I will labour to be like my Saviour, by making humility lovely in the eyes of all men, and by following the merciful and meek example of my dear Jesus.*

And so, in 1629, he married Jane Danvers, and soon after, was ordained as a deacon and then as a priest in the Church of England. He was appointed rector of the small parish of Bemerton, near Salisbury, in 1630 – a position he held for the rest of his short life, for three years, until his untimely death from tuberculosis in 1633, a month before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. By all accounts, he was a deeply committed pastor who embraced the care and nurture of his people with great passion and commitment. He preached, wrote poetry, cared for the poor, and even helped to re-build the church using his own resources, and came to be known in the village as “Holy Mr. Herbert.”

It is in this context of his pastoral journeying with parishioners, and the spiritual challenges that go with it, that Herbert composed the bulk of his poems. None had been published when he died, but upon his deathbed he gave them to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, asking them to be published only if they might help “any dejected poor soul.” This “little book,” as he called it, contained “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master: in whose service I have found perfect freedom.”

As it turned out, Ferrar did publish the poems in the year of Herbert’s death under the title *The Temple*, and it became an enormous success, going through 13 editions by 1680! And its success was no accident. His poetry is characterized by its intricate style, rich imagery, and profound spiritual insight, exploring his lifelong struggle between his privileged background and worldly ambitions as a Member of Parliament and the Cambridge faculty, and his eventual choice to live as a simple country cleric in rural England.

In the spirit of the Prodigal, Herbert vividly portrays in one poem, “The Collar,” the inner restlessness and conflict that would push someone to *resist* such a call of God and to pursue one’s own ambitions, free of constraints:

*I struck the board, and cried, “No more;  
I will abroad!  
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.*

*Shall I be still in suit?*

Indeed, he sounds something like that younger son, who will not live under his father's roof and asks to receive now the inheritance he *would* be due upon his father's *death*. But this initial outburst of frustration and rebellion transitions to a quiet acceptance as the poem progresses, culminating in a quiet, poignant recognition of the poet's truest standing before God:

*But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Methought I heard one calling, Child!  
And I replied, My Lord.*

That the great conclusion of the spiritual struggle is the peace of finally *knowing* oneself to be a child of God ... that this conclusion is so *simple* ... takes nothing away from its profundity, as it's the very thing that neither of the father's sons in the great parable seems able to see – neither one seems to *see* his father at all – to see him *as* he is and for *who* he is ... to see the love and grace and compassion that are always, already, being freely given!

Consider the younger son in his zeal to get away, to get away from home. Perhaps he looks in his father's direction and imagines him as the Great Impediment, the One Who Stands in the Way of his Freedom. Or consider the boy's return home. Consider his guilt and shame and sense of unworthiness, his inability even to look his father in the eye.

Or consider the *older* son – the one who works and works for his father (in his own words) "like a slave for years," and doing so likely to earn his father's approval and affection ... his *recognition*. I suspect there are many sons out there who can appreciate the drive to do that. Perhaps he looks in his father's direction and sees only the One Whose Expectations Must be Met, and then looks at *himself*, and sees one who must work ever harder to meet those expectations. And all the while, right in front of him, his father's measureless love for him goes on and on.

And so, in his own blindness, the younger son runs far away to pursue a misguided notion of freedom and grasp at his desires. And he tries everything ... money, power, sex, popularity, uninhibited choice ... and he finds that they all have their lure and their charms, and in the end, they fail, as they must fail, and he finds himself far away in the midst of famine working for a farmer, in the mud feeding pigs.

What happens next is hard to say, whether his realization is a sincere repentance or a self-calculating recognition that his prospects are better at home. But either way, he is tired and weary and determines to return to his father, where even his father's *servants* have more than enough, and to spare!

No poem in the English language better describes the place of such restlessness and its eventual weariness in finally returning to God than Herbert's "The Pulley":

*When God at first made man,  
Having a glass of blessings standing by,  
“Let us,” said he, “pour on him all we can.  
Let the world’s riches, which dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span.”*

*So strength first made a way;  
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,  
Rest in the bottom lay.*

*“For if I should,” said he,  
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,  
He would adore my gifts instead of me,  
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;  
So both should losers be.*

*“Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness;  
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,  
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness  
May toss him to my breast.”*

It is weariness, indeed, that leads the prodigal home, and his father, filled with compassion, sees him coming from afar, and runs out, and throws his arms around him, and kisses him. And in that moment, lost in his own regret and the blinding splendor of Love, the son can only see his own unworthiness. But his father will have none of it. If the returning son *is un-*worthy, he will be *made* worthy, and re-invested with the clothes and insignia of his true home – the *best* robe, sandals for his feet, and the family ring for his finger – and so be the honored guest at a grand feast to come.

Herbert expressed this powerful moment too in the third of three poems under the simple title “Love,” imagining a dialogue between the weary wanderer and Love himself:

*Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lacked any thing.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:*

*Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*

And so, the prodigal – of the parable, and George Herbert himself – blind to the love right before him is impelled by restlessness to leave home and to look for love, for abundant life, in seemingly every place but where it has always been. But as the parable also makes clear, it is a *holy restlessness, purposed by God himself to make us seek, that we may find.*

The tragedy of the *older son* is that while *remaining* in the house, *not* running off in restlessness, he is revealed to be *further away* from the father than the *prodigal* ever was! His formal relationship with his father is all he knows, and all he seems to want. He is not “cursed” with the holy restlessness that would drive him away only to return and finally see what his eyes have been unable to see – a Love that is always, already, right before the eyes, and that is more than enough to satisfy his heart’s deepest desire.

As another great sinner turned saint, St. Augustine, famously prayed in his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” In that spirit, may our prayer be that God fill us with that holy restlessness that will drive us finally to the divine embrace, and God fill us with that hunger that can only be satisfied at the Lord’s table.

This was indeed George Herbert’s own prayer, as expressed so powerfully in the poem that Nan sang at the beginning of this service:

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a way as gives us breath;  
Such a truth as ends all strife,  
Such a life as killeth death.*

*Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a light as shows a feast,  
Such a feast as mends in length,  
Such a strength as makes his guest.*

*Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a joy as none can move,  
Such a love as none can part,  
Such a heart as joys in love.*

To the Glory of God! Amen.