

"Returning Home"

Sermon on Sunday, January 27, 2019

Based on Luke 4

This past summer, while traveling to southern Germany to meet friends for our traditional Alpine hike, I read this book by a French author. It was called, "Return to Reims." I had found it in the German translation in a bookstore, and it had caught my interest enough that I decided to read it on the train ride. The book, a self-reflection, did not disappoint. The author described his humble roots growing up in a hard scrabble working class family in Reims, a city in northeastern France. He recalled his unlikely success in school and the decision to study philosophy, which was very unusual for people of his social strata. In college and beyond, he got drawn into circles of society that were very different from his own; at times he found himself lost among the more privileged; he experienced embarrassment when asked about his upbringing. He became a different person in so many ways and had less and less in common with his siblings and his cousins and the family in which he was raised, which gradually led him to lose touch entirely.

When his father dies, he returns home for the first time in decades to help his aging mom. As he goes through old photo albums and artifacts, having kitchen table conversations with his mother, a journey of the mind unfolds. He begins to revisit his childhood experiences, re-appreciate his own people, and see more clearly his personal shortcomings and insecurities during his maturing years. But the book becomes more than a personal account, it also reflects on French society, digging deep into the social fabric of his country. It's a fascinating story of one coming to terms with himself, very insightful and honest, a window into a different world.

As I was reading all this, I realized that his experience, while pretty extraordinary, is something we all share. We all go home many times in our lifetimes. Physically or at least mentally we revisit the places that raised us many times in the course of our lives. And every time we come back, we are a slightly different person and the people and places we visit or remember have also slightly changed; sometimes we find that they have changed significantly. All of us become the people we are against the backdrop of the homes we were raised in and the people we were raised with. That's almost too obvious to mention, but we sometimes still underestimate the power of those currents within us. If you want to understand another person, no question is as promising as, "Where are you from?"

Jesus was from Nazareth. In the gospel for today, he returns to his hometown. He comes as a thirty something, still young, unmarried, not far removed from his childhood years. He visits this town by the lake pretty soon after his spiritual immersion in Baptism. And while he was surely familiar with the community, while he knew people and people knew him, he had already changed in significant ways. He had set himself apart from the life of the carpenter that his father had modelled for him. He had left town to connect with the spiritual voice that was calling him out of his family of origin. Inspired by his cousin John, trained in a spiritual boot camp during his fasting days in the wilderness, he managed to become what we would call today a celebrity. He had spoken with power and charisma in other synagogues around the lake, communities that were inter-connected through trades and family ties. And some folks in Nazareth had been asked, "Do you know this Jesus? Wasn't he raised here, in this town? What's his family like?" "Carpenters," was the answer. "His father Joseph is a carpenter. Nice people, but we haven't seen Jesus in years. He's the oldest in the family and left early. He was always a little odd. It seems like he was born under a different star." "In fact, people in town tell the story that, when he was twelve years old, he ran away from his parents to discuss the Holy Scriptures with the Temple scribes. Can

you imagine? This kid is either nuts or a genius, I tell you! I don't know how his parents cope with all that."

Conversations of that nature likely took place in Nazareth, and we know that famous people often have a complicated relationship to their hometowns. Because they tend to be different than everybody else. And for all of us and any of us who have ever felt that maybe we didn't quite fit in, we can relate not only to the obvious comforts of returning home and seeing our kin, but also to the tensions that may arise if you are not quite the person they expect you to be. There is often a slight adaptation process going on when children return home, a falling back into old role patterns to hide the person you have become. Would Jesus be the dutiful firstborn son upon his return to Nazareth? Would he help out his father in the shop for a few days before returning to his ministry? Many of us when returning home, make small concessions about who we are to please our elders; or conversely, later in life, when children return back home to us, we tend to look at them with the eyes of people who once saw them in diapers and on school photos. Do we also allow them to be who they are?

This reminds me of my grandfather Emil Wagner, born into a working class family in 1894, number eight out of ten children. I never met him, he died in 1964. According to several family sources he did well in the basic eight-year education called "Volksschule" that all children received in those days. In fact, he did so well that his teacher approached my great-grand parents and asked them to send the boy to a school for higher education. The teacher even offered to pay for it. But my great-grandfather, a stubborn German - may he rest in peace, - said no. "The boy will work in the mill like everybody else," he decided. In other words, he didn't want number eight to stick out. And my grandfather Emil earned his living in the mill and with agriculture; he worked hard, married, raised five children, had a good life and never went far from home. And sometimes I wonder, what his life would have been like had he had the opportunity to earn a degree, if he had been allowed to use his gifts.

In the gospel story for today all eyes are on this famous preacher who had come home. It is striking how little he says in his own hometown, in Nazareth. He lets Scripture speak for itself, the famous words from Isaiah 61, that talk about good news for the poor and release to the captives. He read those words and only added, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," and sat down. People could have interpreted that brevity as arrogance, and they like nothing less than a home comer being arrogant and no longer "one of us." But Jesus could only be who he was by setting himself apart, by living the life God had ordained him to live. In modern terminology that sounds a lot like "self-fulfillment," but it is not the same. Self-fulfillment or "doing it my way" as Frank Sinatra sang, always has a bit of a selfish component to it. Seeking out your vocation on the other hand has a selfless component to it. A divine force calls you to serve in this world, even if it's inconvenient, even if it rubs against your own wishes and those of your family, a force of God you can't or shouldn't resist.

Jesus was different, but not for the sake of being different. Jesus would not have sung, "I'm doing it my way (as much as I love this song!). Jesus would have sung, "I'm doing it God's way." Every time we do something God's way, we turn to our spiritual home. Every time, you and I do something God's way, we are in God's house like 12-year old Jesus, like 30-year old Jesus, finding ourselves, embracing our truest identity yet again. As we grow as Christians, as we grow as spiritual people, the question, "Where are you from?" becomes more and more profound, deeper, less obvious, and more beautiful. Who are we, indeed, beyond the superficial data points mentioned on our passports? One thing is for sure: there is more to us. And the closer we get to our spiritual home, the more of it is revealed. **Amen.**