

“Going Home”

Mark 6:1-6a

An American author, Bill Bryson, whose entertaining books have been enjoyed by many in this congregation, says:

"There are things you just can't do in life.

You can't beat the phone company,
you can't make a waiter see you until he's ready to see you,
and you can't go home again."

Many of us could tell stories about our dealings with the phone company or with waiters. But what about that thing of going home again? Is that really as difficult as people say, or even impossible?

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is credited with saying that a person cannot step into the same river twice because both the person and the river are constantly changing. That would seem to apply to going home. The old maple tree you climbed as a child had to be cut down. Your favorite aunt who was always so nice, died. The neighbors you liked so much moved away.

And on top of all that, you are not the same person you were. You've seen things, been places, met people, had experiences, rethought some earlier convictions, changed your mind on some of them, grown.

Jesus went home once and according to Mark, it didn't go very well. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, playing with neighborhood children, attending synagogue, learning his father's craft. When he was old enough he became a craftsman in his own right, we assume, possibly making doors, door frames, roof beams, furniture, cabinets. At some point in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, scholars think, Jesus left this conventional life behind and became a religious seeker, embarking on a spiritual quest. He attached himself to a wilderness prophet named John the Baptizer.¹

He couldn't have been away from his hometown very long at all – possibly not even as long as a freshman is gone in that first year of college. In that short amount of time Jesus had begun to travel as a kind of itinerant rabbi or teacher. He had picked up a handful of hangers on, common men, who became his disciples. And it was even reported that miracles had been attributed to him, healings and such. He began to acquire a reputation as a wonder-worker. He drew crowds. He was something of a sensation. And now he was back home.

If we try to put ourselves in the shoes of these hometown people, we may better be able to understand their reaction. Jesus comes back to town, and now he has his own little following, men who have left behind their families and their livelihoods just to be with him and to hear the pearls of wisdom that come out of his mouth. When he comes to the synagogue on the Sabbath it is not to sit and worship with his neighbors, but to teach them about God, as if he were himself a rabbi. The man who built the door to your house now sits before you in the synagogue teaching you about God. It was all just a little too much.

The old Jesus they could handle. Jesus the son of one of their neighbors, whose brothers and sisters still lived in town, the Jesus who had taken a useful, if humble, place in society, this Jesus they knew and appreciated. But the Jesus they saw before them now, they had some trouble accepting. How is it that he is suddenly so full of wisdom? When did he get so smart?

Mark says that "they took offense at him." The word he uses is *scandalon*, from which we get our word "scandal." One person has called it the "scandal of particularity," that God's chosen could come from a particular place, a particular family.²

Jesus, for his part, took it philosophically. "Prophets," he said, "are not without honor except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." Another axiom with a similar sentiment is: "An expert is someone who comes from more than 50 miles away." Still another, "Familiarity breeds contempt," or as Mark Twain said it, "Familiarity breeds contempt and children."

But you have to wonder if it wasn't something of a bitter disappointment to Jesus to be rejected by the people of his own home town. The writer of the fourth Gospel captures the pathos of this and similar experiences when he writes: "He came to his own home and his own people received him not."

To extrapolate from the experience of Jesus to our own lives, is it possible to "go home?" Is it possible to go back to a former locale or to a past relationship and recover what it was that one had at that time?

We received a call from our Alma Mater the other day, a small Christian college in Northwest Arkansas. Calls come frequently during the period of time each year when the college is into its alumni fundraising mode. The young man who introduced himself was a senior. I pictured him on the other end of the line looking at the information he had before him documenting our very scanty and sporadic history of contributions and thinking to himself, "I'll be lucky to get anything from these deadbeats." But he went ahead and made his pitch about how important it was to show a high percentage of alumni supporting the college and how a gift from us, with two alumni in the family, would count double in that respect, if not monetarily. Then came the moment we both were waiting for, the "ask." Could they count on us for a \$20 gift? Boy, I thought, we really must have a poor record of giving! When I said yes, he seemed quite surprised. Maybe they get extra points for getting a gift from someone who hasn't given in so many years. I don't know.

Anyway, as a result of that meager gift, about a week later we received in the mail the updated college directory. Thus we began checking on the whereabouts of many of our college friends with whom we had lost touch. Several are serving as missionaries, one in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Another is teaching for Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization that sends missionaries out to groups of people that don't have a written language. First they work to learn the language and make an alphabet, then they teach the people how to read, then they translate the New Testament into this language.

At first glance it might appear that Diane and I fall into the general pattern. After all, I am a pastor and we are deeply involved in church life. But the truth is, we don't. We have moved on philosophically and theologically from what we now think of as a rather narrow understanding of the Gospel of Christ. Our college friends, however, who appear to be holding to that former understanding, might put it differently. They might say that they have remained faithful to the Gospel of Christ while we have become apostate.

Anyone who has tried to go home or back to a former location and a former group of friends only to find that friends and family are not prepared for the changes that have taken place, for this new person one has become, should take comfort from knowing that Jesus himself had the same problem.

There is a limiting effect when that happens. A person finds himself or herself limited by the concepts that others project onto him or her. Even Jesus, according to Mark, found that “he could do no deed of power” there in Nazareth. That is how Mark says it – not that Jesus chose not to perform any deeds of power, but that he could not do any! The townspeople had effectively turned him back into the carpenter by their limiting view of him.

But what I want to say this morning is that in the community of faith, at least ideally, we are allowed to grow and to change, and in the community of faith, you are allowed to be who you are becoming.

A good friend of mine always remembered how his grandmother would come to his defense when he was being scolded or corrected by other adults in the family. She would say, “Let him be!” It was the wording that he remembered. She didn’t say merely, “Leave him alone,” but rather, “let him be.” Let him be who he is, who he is becoming.

Everyone who is in Christ, the Apostle Paul tells us, is a new creation. The old is passing away and behold, everything is becoming new.

That should be the attitude here in the church. Let each person be who he or she is. Do not limit anyone by what we think we know about that person.

Can you go home again? Possibly. But I don’t think that we are meant to go back. We are meant to keep moving forward. “Home is where the heart is,” which suggests that we keep making new homes, and each day we become a new creation. Old things pass away. All things become new!

¹ *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg, p.26ff.

² *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*