

HOMECOMING
2) “Coming to Ourselves”
Luke 15: 11-24

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Last week, we began this three part series, entitled, “Homecoming,” by considering the premise that we live in a time of an exile. I suggested that this exile can be physical in nature as we witness in the refugees who are streaming into Europe. I also suggested that our experience of exile can be of a more emotional or spiritual nature. There are many people who have physical homes to live in—and some of them quite comfortable homes—but they, nevertheless, may find themselves living in exile---cut off from others, from themselves and perhaps, from God.

Let me tell you about Jack.

Actually, you may already know Jack fairly well. He was born and raised in a world that was experiencing the turbulence of change. As a part of the “sixties generation,” he learned to “question authority” and to be suspicious of the choice to simply “go along” with the way things were. As a young man in college, Jack could see very clearly that there was a different path looming before him, one that diverged rather dramatically from the path his parents had taken. While he loved them deeply, it pained him to see the conformity of their lives and the choices they made to “color within the lines” of accepted practice.

Jack was determined to live his life differently and to take the considerable risk of refusing to make money, prestige, and power the gods that he chose to follow. He became involved in a local church and that experienced grounded him in the conviction that he had a calling to serve others and to practice the values of love, justice and compassion. Jack was quite clear that God was calling him to help change the world for the better. So, he joined the Peace Corps and served for 3 years overseas. When he returned, he did so with the hope of continuing to live out his convictions.

But he soon found out that this wasn’t going to be easy. There weren’t many jobs that actually afforded him the focus he desired and he soon found himself taking a job that offered a very nice salary and great benefits, but failed to address his underlying vision for his life. Time passed and Jack fell in love and got married. Then came two children and the responsibilities involved in taking care of them and their needs—which, of course, were considerable.

Feeling the financial pressure of parenthood, Jack decided that it was time to begin his climb of the corporate ladder. He was good at what he did and respected by his colleagues. It was not difficult, therefore, for Jack to make that climb. In fact, he soon became the “rising star” of his company and the opportunities for advancement all

fell into place. His friends were filled with both admiration and envy. He was, in their opinion, living the dream that they all shared. More than one person told him that their goal when they grew up was to be like Jack.

Jack, of course, was flattered. Who wouldn't be? And for the most part, he was happy. Everything was so new and the potential seemed unlimited. But there were days when Jack felt a twinge of sadness that he was hard pressed to explain or pin down. He would find himself sipping a cup of coffee and simply staring out the window, wondering if there wasn't something more to his life that he was, somehow, missing.

In the meantime, life went on. His kids did well in school...well enough to graduate with honors and win full ride scholarships to very prestigious schools. He and his wife found themselves going through a difficult time as they dealt with the reality of "empty nest" and decided to see a counselor to help them sort out their feelings.

It was, as it turned out, a good choice—not only for the health of their marriage, but also for Jack and his personal struggle with what he now recognized was a mild form of depression. With the counselor, Jack began to explore the question of how he could have so much in the way of recognition and reward and yet, feel so empty and, at times, lost.

In their weekly conversations, Jack could began to piece together some of the clues that had surfaced in his life and he could see that there was a part of himself that he had tended to suppress, a part of himself that he had tended to negate and neglect in favor of the path and the life that he had ended up taking. Somewhere between the idealism of his youth and the realism of his adulthood, he had lost some of the purpose and the passion that had once given his life so much energy, vitality and focus.

The dream that he had for making a difference had been nudged aside in favor of the perks and promises of the good life that seemed, at least at the time, as all important. Now Jack wasn't quite so sure. In fact, with tears in his eyes, he was able to tell his counselor that he often wondered what happened to the Jack that he once knew so well...the Jack that had a dream for changing the world and making it a better place to live.

"If only I had the opportunity to do it all over again," he said, "I think I would do things differently."

Jack, you see, had been living in exile—away from the "home" of who he knew himself to be, the "home" of the meaning and the purpose of the life that he longed to live. As I mentioned in introducing his story, you may actually know Jack fairly well because his story is one in which you might recognize yourself and the saga of your own journey in life. I mentioned last week that Marcus Borg suggests that the theme of exile and return is one

of the “macro themes” of scripture...one that so easily speaks to our own experience in this present moment of time.

We see this “macro theme,” of course, in our lesson from the Gospel of Luke and Jesus’ familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. It is, undoubtedly, one of the most preached about stories in all of scripture because it’s story line is one that so often applies to us in so many different ways and at so many different levels.

Most are familiar with the basic thrust of this parable. A young man, eager to leave home and get out on his own, asks his father for his share of the inheritance. The father complies and this young man leaves a home that he can’t ever imagine returning to. He quickly goes through all of his money and just as quickly descends into a place of disillusionment and despair where he is tempted to eat the food he is feeding to the pigs he has been hired to tend. With his life in shambles and the future bleak at best, we are told that, “When he came to himself,” he realized that there was another option before him, one that he hadn’t previously considered, the option of returning home.

“I will get up and go to my father,” the young man said to himself, **“and I will say, ‘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.’”**

And you know the rest. With this script well-rehearsed in his mind, the young man retraces his steps home, preparing himself for the humbling experience of pleading for his father’s mercy and forgiveness. But before he could get the words out—before he even reaches his home—his father runs to meet him, throws his arms around him and kisses him, rejoicing over his son’s return. The young man’s request for forgiveness was ignored completely in favor of his father’s insistence on throwing a party—a welcome home party—in his honor.

This, you see, is a story of exile and return, a story that in so many ways and at so many levels, describes the human story—perhaps your story and perhaps mine.

Richard Rohr has written extensively, as have others, about the two halves of life. In the first half of life, says Rohr, we often invest ourselves in the work of building the tower that gives us a clear sense of our identity—an identity based upon our ability to gain the recognition, the prominence, the prestige and the power that our world values so much. In essence, we are eager to prove our worth by creating a name for ourselves that will be admired and even envied in the eyes of others. The great irony, of course, is that this pursuit of our identity is one that, invariably, leads us away from our true selves in favor of the false identity that our world would offer...the identity based upon power and prominence.

It is only when we reach that point when the falsehood and the fallacy of this pursuit is realized, that we are able, in the words of the parable, to “come to ourselves” and to see ourselves as we really are. It is only then that we are able to stop building this tower to appease our ego and start tearing it down in order to find our true self—the self that is not

defined by the structures of power and prominence, but by the promise that the Prodigal discovered...the promise that that there is One who waits for us, One who will run to meet us on our way, One who loves and accepts us for who we are without question and enables us to become our true selves.

So, if you find yourself, this morning, living in the far country, exiled from the home that you long for, I invite you to come home to the person that you really are...the purpose that life holds for you, and the God who, even now, waits to embrace you.

In closing, I share a poem by Mary Oliver entitled, "The Journey," a poem that is about the choice to come home.

The Journey*

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,*

*determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

Amen.

*Mary Oliver, Dream Works, 1994