

## Welcome Home

I doubt there are two words in the English language that offer more comfort to more people, no matter your age, no matter your circumstance, than these: “welcome home.”

In the beginning, when we declared our independence from God, and set out, like the Prodigal Son, we were so sure we could do it all without God. Our fathers and mothers in faith ended up as slaves in Egypt, much like the prodigal son, slopping pigs in a far country.

God heard their cry for help, and, after a long journey to encourage a change of heart, brought them home to a land they could call their own. But they, like us, continued to find good reasons why they, like us, should trust our own best thinking, and they, like us, often became lost again, homeless again.

The century we have just left is perhaps the greatest testament to humanity’s inability to go it alone, to trust in ourselves, to rely on what we know to be best. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was by far the bloodiest, most savage century in all of recorded history. Millions slain. Nuclear weapons used on civilian populations. Gulags and ethnic cleansings and the holocaust. Wars of revolution. Wars of colonial power. Wars of choice. It was a shining example of what, left to our own devices, we are capable of becoming. It is not a pretty picture. No wonder it is said: “With God, we can do anything; without God, we will stop at nothing.”

Yet, through it all, God extends his hand to us and whispers, ever so gently, “come home.” How do we get there?

The gospel today tells us.

Yet, it tells us in words that, on the surface seem so simple, but the surface is only the beginning, the entry way, the door; not the entire journey. “Love me”, says Jesus. And that is the doorway to getting home.

“Love me”, of course, isn’t talking warm puppy dog feelings about Jesus. “Love me”, as the doorway home. is all about doing what Jesus did. Like washing the feet of his friends, even the one who was ready to betray him. Like welcoming the stranger, the alien, the widow, the orphan. Like putting people before rules, kindness before duty. “Love me” is not an emotion, it is a way of life.

Paul puts flesh on these bones when we hear of his adventures today in Acts. Paul has a vision. His plans to travel deeper into Asia are nixed. Instead he hears a man calling from Macedonia in Europe. Macedonia is a part of what was once Yugoslavia.

The trip Paul takes is the equivalent of us taking a small boat from Oahu to Maui (about 60 miles) in rough seas, then from Maui to the Big Island, again in a small boat (about 100 miles), then walking from Hilo to Volcano! And he did it all with “great haste”.

When Paul talks about running the good race for Christ, there are times he meant it quite literally!

And when he reaches the end of what has to be an exhausting trip, he goes looking for a Jewish synagogue. He goes looking for the 10 men needed to make a quorum for the Sabbath prayer to begin. But there is no synagogue. Not even 10 Jewish men. What he finds is a riverbank, a riverbank and a few women.

You might expect Paul to feel somewhat chagrined. All that travel, all that haste, all that effort, for a riverbank and a few women; gentile women at that. Pagan women. But, no.

Paul writes: “We sat down and spoke with the women.”

What a way to live! Just taking things as they come. Trusting that all will be well.

Appearances, it is said, can be deceiving. Little did Paul know that on that riverbank sat the beginnings of the most faithful community of the young church, the church at Philippi. The church that would support Paul’s mission financially, prayerfully and with deep friendship. No wonder Paul would later write to the Philippians: “My dear, dear friends, I love you so much! I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride.” Phil. 4:1 (The Message).

One of the women at the riverbank was Lydia. She sold purple cloth, the cloth of the high mucky mucks, of the well-to-do, of royalty. So she probably rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. But Lydia was also this: A woman whose heart and mind were open to a radically new way to encounter life. And in this openness, she was the first European woman to become a Christian. She is, so to speak, the mother in faith of every European who became a Christian. Her legacy had its start on that riverbank.

She says to Paul what Jesus says to us today: “Come, and stay at my home.” “Welcome home.”

It’s no small coincidence that on a day when the message of the gospel, the message of Acts, is “welcome home”, that we celebrate our moms. You moms, at your best, personify the open-armed embrace of “welcome home.” You moms, with your loving acceptance, your willingness to forgive and forget, to cajole and challenge, your warm smiles, at your best, you reflect the love of God into our lives.

And while we often speak of God as “He”, writers of Sacred Scripture, many of our deepest mystics, many of the most committed Christians, also experience God as mother.

It only makes sense. We are both, men and women, made in the image of God. Genesis says it this way: “So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he made them; male and female he created them.” Gen 1:27

So on this Mother’s Day, let me leave you with one woman’s dance with God, a dance entitled “Who Are You?” Perhaps you have asked that question as well.....

She wrote:

God is not rescuer.

God is not safety.

God is not benevolent or critical Father-knows-best.

God is not puppet or puppeteer.

God is not who I thought/was taught he is.

God is love —reckless, spendthrift, indiscriminate, passionate.

God is pursuer — relentless, determined, tireless seeker of my soul.

God is challenger — demanding movement, journey, change, growth.

God is creator — delighted in me, her creation.

God is nurturer — feeding her hungry children at the breast.

God is teacher — eager to share her knowledge and wisdom.

God is dancer and music maker — creation responds joyfully to her choreography.

God is spirit, wind, and fire — uncontainable, she will not tolerate the tidy boxes we painstakingly construct for her.

God is light — exposing, revealing, searching out all that I would  
hide.

God is unknowable yet constantly revealing herself to me with a  
richness and intensity I cannot ignore.

God knows me, penetrates and forms me, recognizes and claims me as she has from  
my mother's womb.

-The Reverend Virginia Going

The door through which the love of Jesus beckons is a door leading to an  
adventurous life! A life of risk, a life of suffering, a life that calls us off of our couches,  
out of our comfort zones, and into the great unknown that we call God.

So this day, may the God who calls us home, often through trying journeys and  
heartbreaking travels, welcome you home.

And to all of you women, those who have given birth to children, and those who  
have not given birth but instead have blessed students with your wisdom, have  
blessed youngsters with your teaching, who have cared for our elders, to all the  
women of St. Elizabeth's, today is your day! May you live it with faith in the God who  
whispers in each of our ears: "Welcome home."

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