

"Homeward Bound"

a sermon

by

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Global Mission Sunday

First Presbyterian Church

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Old Testament Text: Psalm 42

New Testament Text: Luke 15:11-33

Our New Testament lesson this morning comes to us from the gospel of Luke 15:11-33. The Pharisees and high priests had been challenging Jesus on why he eats with sinners. And in response, he offers this reply.

"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 traveled 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.'"

On the first morning of our trip to Bayonnais a year ago, our mission team awoke to a room filled with a warm breeze and gauzy sunshine, the soft sounds of chickens clucking and scratching around outside, a chorus of male voices singing 'how great thou art' in Creole that wafted in from the church where they practiced next door, and a distinct sense of relief that we had arrived in one piece after the jarring 3- hour ride up the mountainside in the pitch black and the rain the night before- a ride so abrasive, in fact, that our sturdy driver had dislocated his shoulder trying to maneuver and wrestle the Mecklenburg County school bus we were on out of the cavernous ruts. A bus, I might

add that looks like it came to Haiti straight out of Sheol but that was actually bought and donated by a few churches including ours 3 years ago and that now makes that same grueling round trip twice a day shuttling the teachers of OFCB ministries back and forth to the school from their homes in Gonnaive at the base of the mountain- a city you may recall seeing all over the news after the most recent hurricane- flooded with water, mud, crops, homes, and worse all washed down from Bayonnais.

After breakfast and morning devotion, we took a walk to get oriented to the area and immediately were flooded with images that tend to stick with you forever. Wading through a sea of tiny schoolchildren who crowded around all in brightly colored OFCB uniforms we were greeted with curious stares and hysterical laughter as they marveled at our hands and pushed back the sleeves of a few of our shirts to see if the white does in fact go all the way up. A little kid led a pet goat around on a string along the “road” outside the school and naked, barefoot children from the larger community with stomachs distended by malnutrition shrieked and ran around us, staring up at us with these huge brown eyes that looked so deep and dark and beautiful until you learned that dehydration depletes the fluid in the eye sockets causing them to bulge out like that. Donkeys carrying loads of grain and wood strolled by just ahead of their keepers. And a stick-thin woman with a few paltry items of food spread out on a blanket offered what looked like pottery saucers for a tea set, but were the now infamous mud cookies- sifted dirt mixed with a little bit of shortening and sold to Haitians who are literally dying to have anything in their stomach at all.

Just back from the side of the road a woman with a makeshift broom in her hand walked out of what is the Bayonnais version of a pretty decent house- a mud and rock structure about 1/3 the size of this pulpit area with a grass roof that may house as many as 9-13 people. She looked up, gave us a radiant smile and a wave, and began to sweep her doorstep- though she didn't have a door and there was no step- only dirt. She was just-sweeping dirt. Which seemed in that place at that moment to be the greatest exercise in futility that I had ever seen. “Do you think that you being there makes any difference?” Someone had authentically asked me about our church's relationship in Haiti before we had left. And I have to say that in that moment where I felt locked in the vastness and futility of it all, I really didn't know the answer to that question.

The statistics about Haiti are sobering to say the least. Haiti has just under a million more citizens than we do here in North Carolina but their Gross Domestic Product of \$12 billion is about 30 times less than that of our state, and 58 times less than the first round of bank bailouts. Americans spent twice the amount of the GDP of Haiti on ice cream last year, to give you some perspective. 1900 miles off our coast is this the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Where in Bayonnais we did not meet a child who had not lost a parent or a parent who had not lost a child to childbirth or diarrhea or the flu, all simple things but deadly when coupled with malnourishment, with the average lifespan being 57 years old. One third of all of Haiti's children die before they reach their fifth birthday, and half of the population earns less than \$60/year.

Actionnel, the pastor and principle at OFCB made the comment that giving the government of Haiti in Port au Prince international aid is like sending fire to watch over

gasoline, so thorough is the corruption that all aid is consumed before it reaches the people and that much at least seems to be pretty obvious as mountains of garbage blanket the streets of the cities and the people's faces and bodies are gaunt with the effects of generational starvation. Actionnel recalls the story of how he wept the first time that he came to visit America when he learned that there were such things as veterinarians. "They have doctors for dogs in this country, and there are not enough doctors for children in Haiti" he will tell you. If you attended our Sunday School class this past hour in Fellowship Hall you may have seen a clip of a video that our guest teacher and former Stapleton/Davidson intern Peter Daniel made who is now pre-med in hopes of working in Bayonnais that shows him standing in a room of Haitians all grinning ear to ear as the shot pans to a smiling mother and baby that had been born moments prior. But what I remember of that video the first time I saw it and commented on the baby was Peter looking down at his hands and dropping his voice, and saying, 'yea, we almost lost mom that night. She just didn't have enough strength to push' - even though her husband hadn't eaten anything for days on end during the weeks of her pregnancy so that she could have what drabs of sustenance he was able to provide- a few spoonfuls of peanut butter a day that ultimately saved her life.

But once the initial shock and awe of the poverty of Haiti- or the Yucatan- or Russia in its own way even for that matter sinks in for our mission teams, invariably another question arises. I say, 'invariably' because there is a common denominator among our ministry partners around the globe that mission groups invariably pick up on and that then functions like the pea under the mattress of the princess possibly for the rest of their lives and I know for mine and that is the joy. The common denominator among the working poor in the church in Russia and the poor in the Yucatan and the dirt poor in Haiti is their deep, effusive, indefatigable faith and hope and joy in the Lord. And the source of discomfort for us comes because we cannot begin to understand it. It just doesn't add up, especially when it feels, right or wrong, like we have half the cares and yet twice the constraints on our faith. Here we are with everything that we could possibly need for our lives- food, shelter, our families, our health, our communities, our considerable assets relative to the rest of the world even in the toughest of financial times and our faith waivers like a reed in the wind. And yet there they are- with no objective data to support any confidence in the future whatsoever, and yet they remain unwavering in their commitment, tenacious in their hope, and filled with deep joy.

And so we find ourselves wondering, how is it that they who have nothing seem to feel so close to the Lord, and yet we who have everything so often feel so far away? We stammer for an explanation- is it that they have fewer distractions with less stuff and so are freed up to think about God more? Do they have simpler lives due to more basic needs? Do they just have no other choice? But such suggestions minimize our brothers and sisters in faith- conjuring up images of the happy poor- romanticizing the lives of people in poverty so that we are then let off the hook for their suffering and need. So what is happening- really?

In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*¹, Henri Nouwen gives an introspective and in-depth exegesis of our text for today- a text he became interested in when he first laid eyes on a detail of Rembrandt's depiction of the parable in a painting of the same name. Our Russia mission team actually saw the painting in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg this summer and it is easy to see why it caught the imagination and heart of this pastor and theologian. Roughly life size, Rembrandt's depiction shows a young, frail man wearing a threadbare and torn tunic and kneeling at the feet of his father. The young man is emaciated- a sandal has fallen off in his collapse, exposing a lacerated foot while the remaining sandal sags. His hair is dull- so thin that it has fallen out in patches leaving him almost completely bald. He wears a saber similar to what would be given a growing boy- a relic of his former life at home. His face, only partially visible buried in his dad's chest, is like that of a child in the womb. But there he kneels in the arms of the father- whose face is down- turned and deeply reflective. It is the face of one who, Nouwen suggests, "Has cried many tears and died many deaths." A rich red cloak is draped over his shoulders- a symbol of his wealth and status- nearly enveloping the boy. His large and weathered hands lay across his son's boney shoulder blades, holding him tightly. And from some unseen source within them there emanates a soft light that illumines their embrace. Though they are off to the left of the painting there is no doubt they are the center of the scene.

In the middle of the painting there is only darkness with shadowy figures in the recesses of the space. But there on the right side of the work- at the edge of the piece and at a distance from that illuminating embrace stands the elder brother. He too is draped in red. But he is standing stiffly upright, his hands tightly clutching a staff also symbolic of his kinship to this home. His brow is furrowed. His gaze intense and fixed. Suddenly it is clear why that dark space is at the center- it is a tension, as Nouwen says, asking for resolution. A vast distance between homecoming and father and eldest son, and the viewer is left wondering if that chasm between them will ever be crossed.

The prodigal, asking for his inheritance- dealing the insult, essentially, of wishing his father for dead, takes his portion of the estate and travels, the text says, to a distant country. Where he squanders all that he has and is himself left for dead. He is reduced to nothing, he has nothing. And then he 'came to himself' and realized that his future was nothing apart from his father and so he returns. His father, in the meantime, has been scanning the horizon each morning for years. And when that figure he had so longed to see finally materialized in the distance the father has no interest in apologies, has no concern for all that has transpired between them- his son is home and he is safe and that is all that matters. The one who once was dead to him has come back to life. And as the father rushes out to meet the young man, his son collapses before him, is covered with kisses and grateful tears, and there in that embrace finds what he had gone off to a distant country searching for- that which had been there all along- the assurance that he is truly loved. And that love provides all that he could ever need or hope for in life, regardless of what life may bring.

¹ Nouwen, Henry. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Doubleday Publishing) 1994.

The elder son, on the other hand, does not share his father's enthusiasm over his brother's return. His bitterness and perplexity and suspicion over a love that is given without prerequisites because it is so unlike his own is deep because his need is also great. He has everything in his father's house but he wants more. His is the complaint, Nouwen suggests, of one who feels as though they never receive their due from life or from God. "I have been working like a slave for you," he says. "And you haven't given me so much as a goat." And at this point we see that the elder son is every bit as wayward as his brother for he too has missed the blessing that had been right before him all along. "Son you are always with me," the father says. "And all that I have is yours." It is hard to say whose suffering is worse- the one who is starved and has nothing but realizes the need to turn back toward home, or the one who shares in all the blessings of his father's house, but cannot allow himself to ever be satisfied and therefore cannot fully receive the love that the father has always and only freely given.

This story is for the Pharisees, of course. Standing as it were with all of their certainty and judgment just outside of God's love that they could neither grasp nor give. But standing on the edge of the radical poverty of the Haitians and yet seeing their delight in the Lord, the ease with which they receive God's embrace, one cannot help but feel like we are filling the shoes of the elder son in this scenario- the point of the parables of Jesus being, of course, that his listeners find their own place in the story. We cannot mask our astonishment that the objective data before us does not support any case for their commitment of faith, the cause for their hope, or the frank expression of their love and yet the Haitians and all of our partners in the faith around the globe who are bearing up under poverty and persecution seem to live it so easily. And the warmth of the light of faith that is emitted from them causes us to see just how much we live our life in the shadows. Despite the fact that our Father's love is ever before us. Despite the fact that we have all that we could ever possibly need, the discomfort comes from the sad realization that their material poverty illumines our spiritual deficits. And when that happens we cannot help but wonder if our affluence and our consumerism has conditioned us so well to their ways that the vitality of our faith has become dependent upon our ability to have it our way and to have enough. In which case it will never thrive.

"I have worked like a slave for you," the elder brother says. To which the father replies- 'But all that I have is yours. We have to celebrate.' It is hard to say whose suffering is worse- the one who is starved and has nothing but realizes the need to turn back toward home, or the one who shares in all the blessings of his father's house, but cannot allow himself to ever be fully satisfied. Who stands amidst abundance and still manages to feel depleted- a soul thirsting for the Lord as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

We are all on a journey, homeward bound as it were, not just moving ever closer to our heavenly home after death, but toward our hearts true home in the arms of the Father. And so perhaps the better question that is put before us by global mission is not, 'why are they so joyful?', but 'are we also willing to fully receive God's love?' Because in order for that question to be answered in the affirmative, there are a few things we first have to accept about ourselves and the world around us and the life we lead. Things that the

Haitians in their material poverty, in their familiarity with death, in their deep hunger know very well. That our life is not our own. That our future is not in our hands. That there is nothing good that comes our way that is not from God. And there is nothing about our world that is even remotely certain. And so we must live in trust- that deep inner conviction that God is searching for us and will not rest until we are found. And we must develop a discipline of gratitude that acknowledges each day- with whatever it brings- as gift. This is how we can begin to recondition our hearts to receive. This is the first step toward finding that true joy in the Lord.

Perhaps this is one of the biggest lessons that global mission brings home- it is the startling recognition of our common need for grace, and the realization that mission is a mutual call. Regardless material circumstances we are each commissioned- Haitians and Americans alike- with the call to help the other come to know what it means to be a beloved child of God. And in this we see the ultimate goal of our journey. Not that we come to realize that we are elder son or prodigal. Not even that we receive the embrace of the father as those who are his beloved. But that we allow ourselves to be so shaped by the daily conditioning of being the beloved that we become the father ourselves. That we risk opening ourselves up to the pain and immensity of love that we cannot help then but scan the horizon in search of an opportunity to pour it out, that we open our arms wide to the world and choose to see it only through the eyes of compassion. And live in such a way that all the world comes to know that as beloved children of God, they are always welcome in his home too.

We do not have to go to a distant country to undergo this transformation ourselves- but if you do go to Haiti you will encounter God's love there, thanks to the work of love that has already begun in the life of this church and the Haitians that are together not just sweeping dirt with our efforts, but really are making a difference by propelling one another into the arms of God and reflecting for each other his compassion and love. A love that is inviting you loosen your grip, come in from the shadows, to open your hearts, to close the gap between yourself and the embrace, and to join the celebration that has already begun, deep in your heart that is God's home.

Let us pray. Holy god, we praise you that you offer us living waters to quench the thirst of our hearts for you. And we give you praise that you stand ever ready to receive us. Open our hearts that we might find rest in you, and be restored to share the good news of the love that we find in your embrace with the world. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.