

Sermon for Sunday, March 6, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Have you ever felt like
you were a long way
from home?

Perhaps you had just got married
and moved into your first house,
and as you looked at the honey do list
and the bills on the table
and you realized that you were now a grown up
and you were a long way
from home.

Or perhaps you were sitting in the train,
the gentle clatter of machinery
lulling you to sleep,
when suddenly you realized
that the tracks beneath the wheels
reached clear across the country,
and you were a long way
from home.

Or you were listening to your grandchildren
and their excitement and hopes and dreams
and all the possibilities
ahead of them,
and you remembered what you had hoped and dreamed
and how life actually
turned out
and you were a long way
from home.

Home...
I wonder where it is for you?

I still remember

returning as an adult
to the city where I had lived for 6 years
as a child.

And as soon as I arrived
there was a smell in the air,
a mixture of sea breeze
and pollution,
which touched something deep inside me.
It felt like home.

Some places
we expect to feel like home.
We go visit our childhood home;
we come home to the church.
But sometimes, maybe even
more often than not,
I suspect,
when we get there
we realize
that we are not at home at all.
Our memories
are there,
but we ourselves -
we are different people.

Sometimes
being a long way from home
is not so much a matter of miles
as of years,
not so much distance
as change.
Feeling like
we are a long way from home
reflects the challenges we have faced,
the people we have become.
And usually, what we call home
has also changed.
The trees have grown,
the paint has peeled.
The world has shrunk,

and home
is a different place.
Going back,
we are still
a long way
from the home
we remember,
the home
we have imagined.
We are a long way
from home.

When Jesus told the parable
which we know
as the parable
of the prodigal Son
he told the story
of someone
who was
a long way from home.
You know the story:
a young man
gets tired of life
down on the farm,
tired of the hard work,
tired
of the never ending cycle
of planting and harvest,
tired of small town life
and small town relationships.
Everyone knows him
and he will always be
his father's son.

And so
he asks his father
for his share
of the inheritance,
as if his father
were already dead,

he asks
for the reading
of the will.
And with his fists clutched full
of his still-living father's legacy,
he goes off to the big city,
leaving his home behind him
with no regrets.
But money only lasts so long,
especially
if all you know how to do
is raise sheep and grow crops
and the only thing that's growing where you live
is the weeds
which spring up
between the cracks in the pavement.
It isn't long
before this young man
is out of money
and out of options.
And so he ends up doing
the only thing he knows how to do,
farming,
but far from being in charge,
his job
is to clean out pig muck
and serve up pig swill.
Even the animals
that his faith declares unclean
have it better than he did.
He is a long way
from home.

And the distance
is not just physical, not just
a matter of miles.
It is the distance
from son of the master
to servant
of a stranger,

from spoiled family baby
to just another
beggar,
from arrogant and extravagant,
to homeless
and helpless.
He is a long way
from home.

Eventually, the story goes,
he comes to his senses.
Anything
has to be better
than where he is now,
even the home
that he tried
so hard to escape.
Even
to go home
not as the triumphant young son,
made good in the city,
but in shame,
as failure and family thief.
Because what he has lost
is not just the fortunes
of the family
but their trust,
and all he has to offer
is his repentance.
It's a long way home.

But when he gets there
he discovers
that home is not
what he thought it would be.
He is greeted
not as failure
and family thief,
but as the long lost and dearly loved son, a cause
for celebration.

But that's not
the end of the story.
If it ended there
this would be
a very different sermon.
We would be reminded
that what God wants of us
is to come home,
to turn aside from the mess
we too often make
of our lives
and repent, turn to God.
It's Lent, after all,
a time of penitence.

But this is not the only story
we need to hear.

Some of you
may have stories
like that of the younger son,
dramatic stories
of conversion
and new faith,
but many of you, I suspect,
are more like the older brother;
have been here all the time.
You've stuck around
with God,
with the church,
even when
it's seemed like
all the action
was somewhere else.

The end of this story
is for you.

The younger son

has come home
and there is
food and there is dancing.
But out
in the fields
is the older son.
He's hard at work,
as he's always been,
ploughing, planting, harvesting,
hand feeding the animals
when the drought
ate up their grass.
Spring, summer, autumn, winter -
day after day, he's there,
cultivating the land
working to keep
the home
he has always known.

He's out in the fields, hard at work
when suddenly
he hears music.
It's coming from the main house,
and as far as he knows
it's no one's birthday.
There's work to be done, this is no time
for celebrations.
So he calls one of the servants
"Go and find out
what is going on!"
The servant comes back,
"It's your brother, he's found!
Your father says, "Come home!"

And the older brother
looks at his hands, palms callused
with hard work
and fingers stained
with dirt.
And he remembers

his brother,
spoiled,
arrogant,
last seen,
fists full of money,
heading off to the city
without a backward glance.

“Come home,”
the words echo,
and he thinks about the home
he has known all these years,
a place of love, no doubt, but a place
too
of hard work
and struggle.
Parties
are few and far between;
since his brother left,
and he had to shoulder that workload,
life has been hard.
He’s still there, the farm is doing okay,
but it hasn’t been easy.
“Come home?” To a place
where hard work
is barely recognized,
and the failure
is welcomed
with celebration?

He’s a long way
from home.

And then his father
comes out to talk with him.
Is his hard work
all for nothing?
No.
Because his hard work
is central

to keeping the farm
in the family,
his hard work
means there is something for his brother
to come home to,
his hard work
has made it possible
for home to be
a place of grace.
And that place of grace
will be his.
He is the rightful heir,
not just of hard work
but of the freedom
which grace brings.

Because the home
the father offers
is not just
a physical place,
a farm in the countryside
which is the family fortune.
Home
is a place where love
reaches
into the darkest places,
home
is a place where hope
is allowed to breathe.
Home
is not about fairness
and just rewards
but about astounding mercy
and unbelievable grace -
for both
the son who
wanders off
to the city
and the son
who stays

at on the farm.

And home
if the story Jesus told
is anything to go by,
home
is the place
where God waits for us all.

One of the ways
Christians have traditionally spoken of death,
is as going home
to God.
And it is - we look forward
to that time
when God waits
to welcome us
for eternity.
But home
is also
in the here and now.

Home is where God waits for us
right in the middle of this life.
In the gospel of John
it talks about God the Word
coming to dwell among us, Christ the Word
making a home with us,
the Holy Spirit
living in us.
Home
is right here
in the middle of the people of God, the community
of faith,
the church,
and we are all called
to come home.

Sometimes coming home
will be, as it was for the younger son,

sometimes, it will be
about repenting,
turning around,
throwing the failures
in our own lives
into the merciful arms
of God.

Sometimes coming home
will be, as it was for the older son,
letting go
of some of our assumptions
about what home is all about.

It might mean
letting go
of other people's failures;
it might mean
realizing
that we too
need the grace of God,
Coming home
might mean
being a community
where hope
is allowed to breathe,
and being a community
which is a
bearer of grace.

Living our lives
so that not only we
but all people
are invited
to come home.

For it is right here
that God waits for us,
right here,
God calls us, as we call to one another,
"Come home."