

06/14/2015 -- Pentecost 3

“Holy Homesickness” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

I used to go to camp for the summer when I was a kid. At first, I went to a YMCA camp in Wisconsin, Camp Manitou, then I went to a Spanish language camp in Northern Minnesota, Concordia Immersion Camp. I was pretty young when I started going - 10 or 11 years old. Every year I went I would suffer from homesickness. It would last for days and it was horrible. The experience of homesickness physically hurt and the unbidden tears and sadness were overwhelming and embarrassing. Nothing I did, thought or tried worked to lessen it. I didn't even like being at home all that much when I was there anyway, so why was everything in my body and being telling me to go back home?

For thousands of years, homesickness has been of primary concern for armies and navies throughout the world. In the 1700s, the Swiss finally gave a name to the profound symptoms of homesickness - *nostalgia*, which is a Greek word meaning “the pain of (not) returning home”. Nostalgia, or homesickness, could wreck entire troops and undermine entire battle plans so generals and battlefield doctors took it very seriously. It could spread like any other disease throughout the camps.

Here is how one Civil War writer described homesickness. Listen to the compassion for the condition in this description:

*“Would you believe – and yet it is true – that many a poor fellow in this Army of the Cumberland has literally died to go home; died of that terrible, unsatisfied longing, homesickness? That it lies at the heart of many a disease bearing a learned name?...Who shall dare say that the boy who ‘lays down and dies’ a-bungered and starving for home does not fall as well and truly for his country’s sake as if a Rebel bullet had found his heart out?” – Cedar Valley Times (Cedar Rapids, IA) – November 26, 1863*

Spiritual homesickness, the longing for God, Holy Homesickness, is a lost sensibility in our modern attempts to follow Christ. When these ideas get lost, when they are not dealt with compassionately, they get picked up in strange ways. The sense of being homesick for God got lost in the early days of the Christian faith and was picked up by the Gnostics of the time. The Gnostics believed in a strict separation between the body and the soul. For most, they believed this world had been created by an idiot God and that Creation and matter itself were the manifestation of evil. Our presence here was a huge cosmic error and we were exiles far, far away from our true home. Our true home was the wholly spiritual realm of God which existed across a vast field of dimensions - the *pleroma* - each one ruled by an Archon, or demigod. For the Gnostics, Jesus was the path-finder who cut a thin blue line of light between this evil and insane material world and the perfect and complete spiritual world which was our true home.

It is quite a beautiful construction, and very elaborate, but gravely flawed. No “heresy”, if we want to call it that, ever disappears. It simply morphs into a new way of expressing itself, in

part because the primary expression of the faith has not found a way to incorporate the ideas into its worldview.

Homesickness for the Lord is one of those ideas which has a difficult time being incorporated into so-called “orthodox” belief, and so the Gnostic desire to separate and declare the created world as evil is always strong, especially in the modern world. Our readings today, however, give us ways of incorporating this sense of *Holy Homesickness* into our understanding of following Christ.

Jesus says in John 14:2,

*In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*

We long for this home, this place, Jesus prepares for us, do we not? If you have engaged the depths of our faith, then many of you have a strong sense of Holy Homesickness, a sense that this is not your true home, that Jesus is preparing a place for you that, even if you have no idea what he is talking about, sounds familiar to you.

Psalms 92, our Call to Worship this morning, is tinged with that Holy Homesickness, that yearning and longing for home, and imagines those who have been close followers of the Lord to be like trees, like the great cedars of Lebanon -

*They are planted in the house of the Lord;  
they flourish in the courts of our God. (Psalm 92:13)*

Paul is keenly aware of this separation between ourselves and our true home and he understands that, once we have committed to Christ, our spiritual address changes radically. He tells the Corinthians,

*So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, (2 Corinthians 5:6)*

I think it is useful to imagine the story arc of Scripture through different mindsets and worldviews. One of the most powerful perspectives for me is to read the Bible as a testament and a witness to what happens to a person, a people, a country, a world when it has been exiled from their true home. What if all of Scripture is an account of being ejected from our true home? Genesis 1, 2 and 3 take on a whole different sensibility when we see it written from the perspective of the homesick soul.

The Puritans used to speak of baptism as being like a fish. When we are pulled up from the waters of baptism in Christ, it is as if we have been caught in the net of the Lord and yanked from one home environment - that of water - into another - that of the air, of the spirit. In that moment, we become a pilgrim in this world, a homeless soul, like a motherless child. Being a pilgrim can feel like exile, and sometimes it is that. The Israelites had 40 years to gain some understanding of pilgrimage and longing, even if their longing shifted from what they thought they knew in Egypt where the onions were excellent and the meat was fresh and tasty, to what they didn't know in the Promised Land, a land which they only knew from the word of God's servant to be flowing with milk and honey. Our pilgrimage in this world, regardless, is because of the spiritual move we have made in our baptism. Paul says to the Galatians,

*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (Philippians 3:20)*

When I was homesick at camp all those years ago, I longed for my physical home and the bodily presence of people and things I knew. Holy Homesickness, however, is all about what we can only know by faith and direct experience with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Holy Homesickness is about restoring an intimate and close relationship with the One who has claimed and formed us. Holy Homesickness means we all are now “from away”. So when we speak of Holy Homesickness we are speaking of our true home as being in a deep relationship with a person rather than a place. Homesickness in any form, finally, is a seeking of spiritual intimacy and deep relationship. Holy Homesickness is also an acknowledgement that something has radically separated us from that intimacy. We miss the relationship, even if we do not know it. We wander the earth as spiritual exiles, and that wandering can hurt very much. The pain of Holy Homesickness is real, as real as nostalgia was for soldiers in the Civil War. But now, for us who have a new address with God, “home” is wherever the Lord is. Paul says in our reading today,

*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:9)*

Spiritual homesickness, Holy Homesickness, is a way of existing in two worlds, two places at once. We miss our spiritual home with God and recognize all the places in our life where we are separate from God, and we also know God, through the promises of Christ, is with us even in the midst of our exile. In the midst of our yearning for our true home, in the midst of whatever suffering befalls us here, whether it be grief, sickness, impending death or fear, we also know the presence and intimacy of a relationship with God.

God’s presence and the grace of God’s relationship with us are like the mustard seeds in Jesus’ parable today. The seeds are scattered and thrown everywhere. The kingdom of God is like a vast and liberal seeding of our entire lives with the presence and grace of God. Christ has provided us with the ground for that grace and presence to be made known throughout the world. The seeds grow whether we are awake or asleep. This seeding is simply what God does - God seeks to make God’s home with us, to live among us - *Immanuel, God with us*. Perhaps our Holy Homesickness is something God feels through us, for us, and we feel it for God - and for God’s sake. Maybe this is what Paul means when he says,

*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?  
(1 Corinthians 3:16)*

Our home now is with God, and Jesus Christ has brought us home spiritually. And God is at home with us, even now. The kingdom of God is already our spiritual address, so long and yearn for your home. Let the distance between you and your true home ache and hurt inside of you. Do not resist your Holy Homesickness. Claim the longing and return home knowing the love and compassion of the Lord at once waits for you there, and also is with you now. Be

compassionate with your longing, your Holy Homesickness, just like that writer who had such compassion for the soldiers who suffered from nostalgia in the Civil War.

Long ago, the Hebrew people were exiled from Jerusalem and were enslaved in Babylon. While they were there, the Prophet Daniel spoke to the people about their true home, Jerusalem. Many of Daniel's prophecies were frightening, in part because he acknowledged the pain of being away from home. He engaged the Holy Homesickness of his people. But the very last words Daniel speaks to the people are a call to hope and fulfillment of God's promises to God's people, of whom we are also. Daniel said to the people of Israel while they were in Babylon,

*But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days."* (Daniel 12:13)

With our distant brothers and sisters, and with our brothers and sisters now, let us go our way till the end, walking with yearning and desire, with a Holy Homesickness for our true relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.