

Welcome Back Sunday: Where the Heart Is

(The following is a part of my message from Welcome Back Sunday. The reflection on 9/11 is just below this post.)

John 14:23

This is our season of homesickness. Some of you have just moved here, while others have been here for a while and have just returned from visiting family and friends. That's where Julie and I are right now. We miss our daughter, our parents and siblings, and the cousins that I an played with while we were back in California. It's a season of homesickness. Many of us are here today missing places where we feel loved—places where many of the people we love still are. That's really the essence of homesickness, isn't it? Missing the places where we love and feel loved.

But it's not just people and houses that define home for us. There are all kinds of things that we miss when we feel homesick. That gives me a good opportunity to share with you one of my most deeply held beliefs.

It's something I learned from my grandfather as a child and was reinforced in my relationships at home and at church in my teens.

It's something that grew in me during my college and seminary years.

It's my firm and passionate belief that in almost every way that matters, baseball is superior to football. Now I know that football season just started, but that doesn't change what I believe. I miss baseball, can you tell?

I'm not alone in this. One of the great philosophers of the 20th century agrees with me on the superiority of God's game, er, baseball over football. Of course I'm talking about George Carlin. Listen to how he describes it:

Football is played on a gridiron. Baseball is played in a park.

Football players wear helmets. Baseball players wear caps.

In football the specialist comes in to kick something. In baseball the specialist comes in to relieve somebody.

Baseball has the 7th-inning stretch. Football has the 2-minute warning.
Baseball gets extra innings. Football has sudden death.
In football the runner gives you the stiff arm. In baseball the runner gets to slide.

But the biggest difference is that in football the main objective is military: The battle is fought in the trenches, the field general (you know him as the quarterback) seeks to evade the blitz and soften up the enemy line with a pounding ground attack and aerial bombardment. Sometimes he uses bullet passes; when he thinks it will work, he goes for a bomb to riddle the enemy defenses and penetrate the end zone.

In baseball, the object is to go home.

See what I mean? There's no arguing with George Carlin on this one.

23 Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

John's gospel is a unique book in the New Testament. The other three gospels can be grouped together because they follow the same patterns and tell the same stories, but John is different. He covers a lot of the same events—and a few that aren't in the other three books—but he tells those stories differently. He uses images like 'word' and 'light' and 'life' that make it easier to understand who Jesus is and what he was trying to do.

John's gospel is the one we give to new Christians, because it gives people a great foundation for getting to know Christ in a meaningful way. If you've never read it from start to finish, or haven't in a long time, I'd recommend it to you.

Chapter 14 of John's gospel is the beginning of the 'Farewell Discourses,' a series of teachings and prayers to help the disciples learn to live and serve without Jesus being physically present with them.

The chapter starts with some familiar passages: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled...in my father's house there are many rooms, or mansions,' followed by a promise to go and prepare a place for his followers. By the time we get to our text in verse 23, Jesus is still talking about the idea of 'home.'

There's a little bit of profiling going on in our text. Listen to what Jesus says: 'You'll recognize the one who loves me because she'll obey my teaching.'

Now Jesus isn't saying that 'if we'll do A, then B will happen—that if we love him then God will love us in return' He's giving the profile of what a Christian really looks and sounds and acts like: You can recognize the people who love me—they're the ones living out my teachings.

That's a big part of what we want to do together in this church over the coming year. To focus on the teachings of Jesus and the way they're interpreted and explained in the Scriptures is a big part of what we're all about in this place.

Just looking back on the last year together, we've walked through a lot of what Jesus had to say. We spent last fall on the Lord's Prayer, and how those words of Jesus teach not only how to pray, but how to live.

During Advent last year we talked about Christmas Gifts You Can Use: the way Jesus inspires Faith and Joy and Love and Hope for the world.

During Lent this year we talked about the meaning of the Atonement, of Christ's sacrifice for all of us. And from there we explored the Resurrection and what it means for us, and then Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and how it transforms our lives individually and as a church.

This past summer we enjoyed the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Starting next week we're going to begin a journey through Paul's Letter to the Romans—a letter he wrote to explain what faith in Christ means for people in the most influential city of the day. Because there's a message for London in this letter to Rome.

Learning the teachings of Jesus—and learning to obey those teachings—is the road map for growth as a Christian disciple.

All of that's important, but what I really love is the next part of the text. The promise in our passage goes like this: God promises to make his home with the people who love him.

To put that another way, the promise to everyone on the journey of faith is not just that we'll live with God somewhere, somehow in the future. The promise is that he'll come and live with us and redefine what home means to us right now.

This past week we remembered the tragedy of 9/11. There was an essay in the Guardian by a writer who described a pair of shoes he keeps in a cupboard in his office. They belonged to his father. They're scuffed and scratched—they're covered in dust and sealed in a plastic bag.

The writer's father had been in one of the twin towers, on the 59th floor, and had survived by making the long walk down the stairs to the street. When he got out of the building, he started walking, and he walked all the way to his family's home on 71st Street.

The writer can't make himself get rid of those shoes, or even to store them in a place where he won't see them as often. The shoes are a part of what saved his father. The shoes are what brought his father home.

That leaves us with a few questions as we reflect on our text today.

What is it that rescues you from the disasters in your own life?

What is it that reminds you that you're safe and secure and loved?

What is it that brings you to the place where you feel at home?

As a recovering English major there's a little voice in the back of my head that reminds me that every new paragraph—every new section—every new year begins with a topic sentence. I've been thinking about what that sentence should be for us, and here it is:

Jesus Christ is the one who defines what 'home' really means for us.

In this church—among this diverse group of people from Britain and America and all over the world. In this place we believe that Jesus Christ offers the true comforts of home to every person. We find out what that means as we learn his teachings, as we become obedient to what those teachings call us to do, and as we grow into mature disciples of the one who made us, redeems us, and calls us into his family.

If you've been coming to this church for a while now, then welcome back.

If you're here for the first time or new to London or just getting started with us—if you've come here this morning feeling more than a little homesick, then welcome. You're among friends, and you're in for a great year.

POSTED BY REV. JOHN A. D'ELIA AT 9:34 AM 0 COMMENTS 

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Remembering and Shaking Free from Memory

It's an awful sort of anniversary.

I've been reading posts today about where people were and what they were doing when the attacks came. My East Coast friends were on their way to work, people near where I lived in Southern California were mostly waking up to the deed already done, and folks here in the UK were at lunch. Everyone remembers. Everyone does something different with their memories.

Some have come to see the world as a far more complicated place than they thought it was. No one can fully grasp the full array of ethnicities and religions and cultures around the world, but most know more than they did on 9/11. Some have devoted themselves to seeking common ground with those who committed (and supported) the attacks, as if conversation alone would prevent fanatics from being, well, fanatics.

Others have allowed their memories of that day to make them hard and angry and defensive. Many of these people were like that before, which really points to an odd sort of resistance to the impact of the attacks: they really weren't changed by them at all. But there are many who evolved into a reactive form of fearful bitterness, and

it's those people who grieve me the most.

Because in my little corner of the world, most of my close friends and family are Christians. Not only that, but many of us would identify ourselves (with varying degrees of volume) as evangelicals--people who believe that Jesus Christ died to redeem the world, and that it is every believer's task to share that message. That specific description of our faith and ethics is important, because I fear that it has become yet another casualty of the terrorist attacks eight years ago.

There is a disconnect these days between the faith we assent to and the decisions we make. I suppose that's always been true: Christian history is dotted with decisions and events that seem to go directly against the doctrinal and ethical beliefs of the faith. But I can't do anything about the Crusades or the Salem Witch Trials or slavery. What I'm talking about, in the historically disciplined words of Pete Townsend, is my generation.

My generation of evangelicals has allowed the attacks of 9/11 to separate their faith from how they interact ethically and politically.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan offer a case in point. Now I'm not much of a pacifist, but I do recognize the inherent theological challenge of violent action for the Christian. It's John Calvin's 500th birthday this year, so let's give him an opportunity to weigh in. After making a solid case for a government's responsibility to provide for national defense, he says this:

But it is the duty of all magistrates here to guard particularly against giving vent to their passions even in the slightest degree. Rather, if they have to punish, let them not be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity.

Calvin continues with what I believe to be the point in all of this:

Let them also (as Augustine says) have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing.

That's the part we evangelicals too often seem to have lost. True evangelicalism is

driven by compassion for people who haven't yet experienced the forgiveness and restoration that comes from Christ alone. True Christianity is marked by the compassion demonstrated by Jesus himself in his earthly ministry: sacrificial, redemptive, and available to all. True Christian discipleship leads us inevitably to the awareness of our own redeemed depravity, and teaches us to humbly acknowledge what we have in common with our enemy.

Not much of that is working its way into public discourse about the wars we're fighting, which is catastrophically disappointing to me for a country that enjoys the myth of being built on Christian principles.

Which brings me (strangely) to the current debate over creating a public health service in the US. I'm glad the debate is taking place. It's long overdue, and I believe there are important philosophical questions to be asked about the role of government in the lives of individuals. I believe that to be true, and yet the people disappointing me the most are my evangelical Christian brothers and sisters. Few that I have heard, even if they have perfectly valid objections to the expansion of social programs, have articulated a Christian response either to the problem or to the proposed solution.

Most of the people I have in mind have a sort of hero-worshipping relationship to Winston Churchill. They admire, as I do, his courage and tenacity and his strong leadership in a time of war. Most will be shocked to learn that he gave strong, early support to the formation of the National Health Service. Listen to what he said in 1944:

The discoveries of healing science must be the inheritance of all. That is clear. Disease must be attacked, whether it occurs in the poorest or the richest man or woman simply on the ground that it is the enemy; and it must be attacked just in the same way as the fire brigade will give its full assistance to the humblest cottage as readily as to the most important mansion. Our policy is to create a national health service in order to ensure that everybody in the country, irrespective of means, age, sex, or occupation, shall have equal opportunities to benefit from the best and most up-to-date medical and allied services available.

I'll pause to let that sink in.

Most will be even more surprised to learn that after the NHS was established by a postwar socialist government, Churchill returned to power and had the opportunity to close the entire thing down. Even under pressure from his own Conservative party, he refused to do it.

I think we could learn a lot from the later views of Winston Churchill. The Second World War was far more devastating than the 9/11 attacks, and it was far more traumatic in the UK than in the US. And yet, on the other side of that horrible event, with most of his cities still in bombed-out rubble, Churchill came out more compassionate, more sacrificial, more willing to make sure his neighbor was taken care of.

I know I've read those principles somewhere before.

It's an awful sort of anniversary, but maybe there's still time to redeem something from it. There is an enormous amount of room for debate on the issues that confront us these days, but I have little patience for Christian people who refuse to wrestle with Christian principles in those debates. To call Jesus your Savior without acknowledging your enemy's need of salvation is a sin. To enjoy the benefits of Christ's sacrifice without being willing to sacrifice in turn for your neighbor is a scandal.

On this awful anniversary my prayer is that we'll resist the temptation to use the memory of 9/11 to fuel our bitterness and anger and fear. My prayer is that we'll take this day to pray that God would soften our hearts, sharpen our minds, and make us into more mature disciples of Jesus Christ