

Coming Home: Foundations and Beginnings  
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I Timothy 2:1-7 and Luke 16:1-13

A minister started a new call, and, anxious about the first Sunday, asked a valued mentor, "What should I preach about?" "Preach about God," the veteran pastor said, "and preach about 20 minutes." I shall endeavor to do more of the former than the latter, but let me simply say how grateful I am to be here.

Some churches call it Rally Day. Some call it Gathering Sunday. Some don't call it anything, or a random "first Sunday back." I do like the concept of Homecoming Sunday. I like it, that is, after I get over a little flashback drama, high school memories. Perhaps it's also the case here, but where I grew up, in central Ohio, homecoming was a big deal. A big pep rally and bonfire Thursday night. A big football game on Friday night, with Homecoming queens and kings, all preceded by a big parade. Saturday night was the big homecoming dance.

Ah, the homecoming dance. We saved tuxedo rental for prom, so suits and gowns were the order of the day. I was saddened to learn of Cokie Robert's death this week; the dignity of her service and the significant contributions she made to our civic life. Ric Ocasek's death touched me personally, as it was his music, the music of the Cars, that accompanied my homecoming dance. Accompanied, that is, sad, embarrassing dancing, which really was nothing more than either shuffling awkwardly or mindlessly jumping up and down, depending on the song.

With that, welcome to Homecoming Sunday.

Think about that image. Homecoming. Coming Home. The journey and the destination. Your high school. Your childhood house. A beloved one not seen in a long time. A treasured family memory. This place. Coming home.

In a poem called "Little Gidding," T.S. Eliot wrote: "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

So that even when we come home, to a memory, or a place, already a shift has happened. It's not quite the same. Nor would it be. Nor should it be.

You all have experienced this, together. A distinguished pastorate of nearly a quarter century has concluded, a beloved colleague and friend and leader, whom you celebrated so well just two weeks ago. I saw the pictures on Facebook; I want some of that cake! There is no doubt still among us a mixture of gratitude and grief and perhaps a little curiosity.

Typically, at the end of such a notable ministry, the presbytery would determine that an interim time is needed. You all made the case, wisely, I believe, and the presbytery agreed, wisely, I believe, that circumstances didn't automatically dictate that need here, that your vitality and sustainability were well-established. So instead of an interim period of 12 or 18 or even 24 months, you all experienced one of about 10 days.

And here I am, myself coming from a long-term pastorate and a tender farewell. While I've pledged to limit "here's how we did it in Rochester" or "here's how we did it in Chicago," and while people have pledged not to say "here's how we've always done it here" too much, we all know that those memories and

experiences and relationships shape us, shape our communities, have shaped this place, this place to which we are coming home.

My job is not to fill Cindy's shoes. It's also not to wear the same shoes I've been wearing.

Perhaps you remember the late 90's song from a group called Semisonic, "Closing Time": "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." It's true, very true.

And more than that, we are in this together, endings and beginnings, all of us. Just as a church is not a building, but a people, so a church is not the minister, but the people.

We come home to much more than a place, don't we? To memories. To possibilities. To relationships. To faith. To faith. That is what we come home to, this Sunday, yes, and Sunday after Sunday, moment after moment, year after year, generation after generation, whether we've been here 50 years or one year or 96 hours. Coming home to faith, never a static enterprise, but fluid and organic and ever-unfolding.

Contexts change – the particular contexts of this place and community and the broader, rapidly shifting context in which we find ourselves, American religious life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet even so – and even as we come home to be sent out to serve – there are touchstones, essentials. Let's call them *foundations* this morning. We sing of them. We speak of them in our creeds and prayers. And we hear of them.

The lectionary is not necessarily our friend today, except that in an odd way it is. I was hoping for something upbeat and uplifting about new beginnings, about hope, the future, about the genius of Presbyterian decision-making processes. But one of the foundations of our faith is that it leads us in unexpected directions, that Scripture chooses us and not the other way around, that we engage the Bible from where we are and invite the Spirit to take us where we need to be, whether that comforts us or discomfords us. If today is a day about context setting, about transitions and endings and beginnings, about foundations, then we get that in robust doses...

In the reading from I Timothy, we are first urged to pray for everyone, including and especially the king, and "all who are in high positions." We will have plenty of time to unpack the implications of that over our seasons together. But at its baseline, there is a Presbyterian affirmation embedded in that prayer request, what the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian H. Richard Niebuhr called "Christ transforming culture," that while sounding a bit presumptuous, insists that because we believe in a sovereign God who loves the whole world and not just the church-y part of it, a God who loves every creature, and not just a particular faith brand, that we should do the same, that rather than distance ourselves or detach from the world, we engage.

*What* that engagement looks like will go in a million directions, with room for agreement and disagreement and faithful discourse and getting it wrong and getting it right and being too timid about it all.

*That* we engage the world that God loves so much seems not to be up for debate, however.

This is much more than the church meddling in politics. "Pray for all who are in high positions." All? Yes. That president or this one. That governor or mayor or this one. It doesn't say how to pray, or for what. That's up to us. Just pray. That's political, to be sure, and perhaps even prophetic.

One foundation, then, remains our shared calling to go into the world, the permeability of church walls, so that the difference between "in here" and "out there" is barely perceptible. That's really not so much a new beginning in this place, but an affirmation and continuation of what has been.

What follows in I Timothy is another foundation, one that will also take many conversations to unpack – the ongoing conversation about who Jesus is and how he connects to us and how we connect to him and how we enter the life he offers. I Timothy calls him “mediator” (this is what the theologians call “atonement”) but also reminds us of his humanity, which, in turn, connects him to our humanity.

That same Jesus tells us an odd story. A dishonest property manager is called on the carpet. He fears he will be fired, so he slashes the debt of many of his boss’ debtors, so that they will be nice to him when he is out on the street. It’s puzzling logic, isn’t it? But rather than firing him, the boss likes what this guy did – shrewd, he calls it. Jesus explains: “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

David Lose writes that “Commentators’ opinions on the meaning of this passage and its original setting and import diverge rather significantly.” Which means that scholars agree that this doesn’t make much sense. That’s a relief.

Jesus follows with other affirmations about stewardship, about trust, about God and wealth. You can’t serve both, he says. That becomes another foundation for us to consider in this season of endings and beginnings. Just as I Timothy reminds us of the interplay of faith and public life, so does this curious parable remind us of the interplay of faith and culture. In this case, culture is represented by money, but it’s really a bigger issue of stewardship, isn’t it – our money, our time, our commitments?

We can ask the question this way – what role will faith have in our lives, but to ask the question that way makes faith just one more in a list of things.

Rather I like the question *this* way – how does faith impact, inform, shape, all of life, yours and mine, our work, our play, our children and grandchildren, this community? How does it shape the ways we engage the world and how does it form the choices and decisions we make.

This is never easy, nor linear, nor static, for any of us. At times it can be awkward or uncomfortable, like a bunch of high schoolers dancing. But even so.

Augustine wrote that “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in you.” That is the homecoming journey we share. As we look around, we will discover companions, fellow travelers with whom to share this journey. There are foundations upon which this journey is based, building blocks. Today they are called engagement with the world, the stewardship of all things, a deep connection with Jesus. But more than that, there is a vision, never a guarantee, a promise. “There is a way,” the choir sang, “a road, that will lead us home.” That road is where we start and where we end. It is called faith. It is called home. Amen.