

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Kickoff Sunday

September 14, 2008

“Homecoming!”

Luke 15:14-24

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Life’s meaning can be found near home, but sometimes perspective and understanding comes when we journey far from home. Traveling to other places and meeting people often results in vastly different experiences that clarify what we want to do with our lives.

Tom Brokaw in his book, *The Greatest Generation*, gave many examples of the men and women who came back from World War II, who returned to America determined to create the best nation the world had ever known. They did not return to settle back into the same jobs and community life they had left. They were determined to get their education, and use it to transform the way life was lived in America. They built homes, communities and a strong nation to lead the entire world in time of peace. Those who came back from that World War came home to build a nation at peace with itself and the rest of the world.

Whatever experiences we have influence who we are. It does not matter whether we spend our life at home like the elder brother in our scripture or travel to a far country like the younger son in the scripture.

Who we are is far more than what we do and yet when we meet new people we often are asked, “What do you do?” “What was your line of work?” It seems this is an easy criteria to become acquainted with what you feel is important in life.

Certainly today, some persons believe that their whole life is defined by what they *do* rather than by who they are.

Author Erroll Bailey refers to these persons in his book *Mr. Dream Merchant*, as *human doings* rather than human beings. Human doings are persons who spend the majority of their lives concerned with what they do in order to be acceptable to others and to themselves. Their image of themselves is largely defined by their achievements, the projects they complete, the awards they win, the academic degrees they earn, the property they acquire, the control they have over other people and buildings that often carry their names.

On the surface, this identity is very practical. There are auditions for movies that are totally focused on what an aspiring actor or actress can perform. For the Olympics, there are extensive tryouts and competition long before an athlete finally is accepted on a team to represent a country. We expect children to crawl, walk, and then run. We expect a person recovering from an operation to start a gradual progress toward recovery.

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Growing spiritually also takes time and effort. One does not become a deeply spiritual person overnight. Living spiritually is a life-long process with life experiences connecting to the spirit within us. Within each of us, God has placed a spiritual dimension. Qualities and beliefs are the foundation, which we use to measure what is important and which things are not so important for our lives. These inner beliefs have a major influence on what we learn from our experiences in life, how we interpret what happens to us in the world.

Two people having the same illness may learn very different lessons. For one, it may be a very depressing shift from beautiful hair to an embarrassing baldhead. To another it may be a shift from beautiful hair to brightly colored turbans, racy scarves and hats and a determination not to let the zest of life be reduced to fear of what others may think of having lost one's hair.

What are we afraid of? Are we allowing fear to have power over what we think of ourselves? Have we become *human doings* rather than human beings?

The search today is for meaning for life. Just staying alive and relatively comfortable may be fine but is that the all God expects us to do with every day and night? Is there some way I can put what I believe into action as an expression of gratitude to the God who gave me life?

For the prodigal son, staying home and tending the fields was boredom. He was eager to try his wings, to go to a far country, to try something new and different, to live life in the fast lane with no responsibility and no goal except to do whatever would bring pleasure to him. He wanted to forget all he had learned from his father and living in his father's house. The prodigal son wanted to put his entire upbringing behind him and cut free to explore the wide world with no bearings or boundaries.

Some people in our society still measure success too often by how much they have—not how well they use what you have. Other people today choose to be intentional in what they do with their gift of life. They have ideas, projects and goals. They have things they wish to accomplish not just for praise or recognition but because they know

- a) working toward that project adds meaning to their own life and
- b) accomplishing the project will be appreciated by someone else.

These people are not afraid to start an activity, for they know every journey starts with the first step. Those who live their lives with fear limit their excursions to only what they can be sure they can accomplish. There is little adventure, and life often loses a great deal that it might otherwise have accomplished.

Jesus used the parable of the prodigal son to teach us about the prodigal father. The word “prodigal” means “with abandon, completely spontaneous, abundant.” The father was so overjoyed when he saw his younger son returning home that he ran out to greet him. The

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father accepted him back into the family and declared his return a reason for everyone to celebrate—not because of the past, but because there was a positive future. His son, who was dead, is now alive. He was lost and now he is found.

When people live their lives in fear, they risk losing the ability to rejoice spontaneously as the father did. Fear tells us to be careful because someone might not agree with us. When we fail to speak up and encourage someone who is struggling or choose not to speak up when we feel God is guiding our words, we are choosing to have our life directed by fear instead of confidence. Let us never hesitate to be faithful to God by failing to do something thoughtful for someone else just because we are afraid others might misunderstand our action.

Life filled with faith is the opposite of life guided by fear. Remember even the shepherds in the field on Christmas Eve were told, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy.” (Luke 2:10) Jesus had come to earth.

There are many hurting people who are living in fear in the world today. We have good news to share. God is eager to welcome every person home who will come.

Perhaps you have been living with an inner hurt for years. Without fear of reprisal, you can give that inner hurt to God. Perhaps God is just waiting for you to allow Him to deal with that fear you have been carrying around so long.

At times, I forget where I put things. Maybe you recently have tried to find things.

David Griebner tells a parable of “The Finder.”

The Finder stood there as he had many times before. In his hands, he held familiar things: a pen, a wallet, a pair of eyeglasses, a sock and a shoe.

“I believe these are yours,” he said.

“Yes, I believe they are,” murmured a man as he looked at what the Finder offered him. He was sitting up in bed. It was his room, and it was just before dawn. The Finder always came just before dawn.

“Shall I leave them then?” asked the Finder.

“Yes, if you please. Just put them on the dresser.”

“As you wish,” replied the Finder. He set the items down and then he was gone.

You see the man in the bed was always losing something. One day it was a pen, his keys, his checkbook, and his glasses. The next day it was a book, a ring, his belt, and a sock. If an item weren’t attached permanently, the chances were that he

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had lost it one time or another. If it weren't for the Finder, he probably wouldn't have had much of anything left at all. For before dawn, the Finder would arrive in his room. He always carried everything the man had misplaced or lost throughout the day. Moreover, the conversation was always the same.

"I believe these are yours."

"Yes, I believe they are."

"Shall I leave them then?"

"Yes, if you please. Just put them on the dresser."

"As you wish," the Finder would reply. And then, he would go.

One day the man lost a great deal. He left little bits and pieces of himself and his life all over town, more than at any other time. He even forgot where he lived and was glad when someone recognized him and showed him the way home. He had no idea how the Finder could gather it all up. But there he was as always, just before dawn. His arms were full of things, including some items the man didn't immediately recognize as his.

The Finder was gentle as ever.

"I believe these are yours."

"Yes, I believe they are."

"Shall I leave them then?"

There was a pause before the man in the bed said, "No, I think not. You keep them."

"I'll save them for you then," responded the Finder.

"As you wish," said the man.

From that morning on that was how it went every day just before dawn, until everything the man had was safely in the hands of the Finder. And then, he never lost himself again.

Some times, we can expend enormous energy on needless tasks instead of allowing God to guide us. We can lose parts of ourselves in little things that clamor for our attention in the world. We can spend our days looking for things we do not even need to find.

The man in the bed finally let The Finder keep the things for him instead of leaving them

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only to be lost again. Gradually his trust in The Finder grew so that The Finder had all of the man and the man never lost himself again.

The parallel is that when you allow God to have your entire life, your forgetfulness, your hopes and dreams, your anxieties and your hurts, God, like the loving prodigal Father Jesus showed us, receives all these things and gently reshapes them into a beautiful person who no longer fears. You are truly found and experience the oneness with God.

Where does that oneness come from? Ask the prodigal son. The scripture, tells us the prodigal son came to himself and saw things clearly. He got up and headed for home. He had no fear of the reception he would receive from his father. He just greatly underestimated the joy of his father to see him home.

When we feel separated from God, it is so easy to spend countless hours wondering what it would be like to be welcomed home by a prodigal heavenly Father. To see the welcome coming even before we arrive at the door is something that is difficult to imagine. To have the father running toward us throwing his arms around us and saying, “Come and celebrate for my son who was dead is alive, he who was lost is found,” is not what we would anticipate.

Here on earth, God extends this “Welcome Home” to those who are seeking their rightful home with God often through us. Through Christ we understand this story as our story—the story of every person in one way or another, who seeks to go on his or her own, who discovers often through hardship that the world is bigger than human wisdom and guts. Home is where the heart is and at the center of our hearts is the love of our heavenly Father, who sent Jesus Christ to show us how very much God values each of us.

Our hearts will always be restless until we find our rest in God.

Our joy has no end, for it comes through the spirit of the living God within and beyond us waiting to enfold every person and all creation.

What a marvelous homecoming is being planned for each of us when we hear those words from God, “Welcome home.”

Amen.