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Welcome Home?

So welcome home!

When the staff and Education ministry planned for today to be the day when, we hoped, everyone would come back to church after summer travels. When we planned for today to be the day when we go back to our regular schedule of two services and Sunday school; when we planned to have a big celebration during the 10 o'clock Sunday School hour with pancakes and sausage to celebrate the beginning of a new chapter – new library, new school year, new small group study opportunities (all kinds of good things); when we planned to welcome everyone home – back to the the wonderful community which is Forest Lake Presbyterian Church – I had not checked the assigned scripture passages for this day.

Almost every Sunday, I preach from what is called the Lectionary. A Lectionary is a schedule of assigned Bible passages – Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel and Letters/Epistle – for every Sunday. And almost every Sunday, I choose from the passages that are assigned. This discipline prevents me from preaching only from the Scriptures that I like most and it protects you from hearing only the Gospel “according to Ellen.” Doing this also forces us to consider and to hear from the whole witness of The Bible. That is a good thing. Right?

Well. Scripture will not allow us to settle into the warm, sentimental shallows of a Hallmark style “Welcome Home Sunday” today. These passages are hard to hear. They involve judgment and destruction and division.

Isaiah 5:1-7
Luke 12:49-56

I don't know if you still read the comics in the newspaper. I do. And there is one comic strip in our State Newspaper called “Zits” that follows the life of a teenaged boy, named Jeremy. And a couple of weeks ago, there was one strip in which Jeremy's parents tell him that his curfew is midnight. “Midnight” they say. “Is that clear?” they say. “Yes”, says Jeremy. But when Jeremy gets into the car with his friends, they ask him, “What time do you have to be home?” To which Jeremy replies, “Well my parents were a little vague.”

Today, we get a clear picture and description of what home is and it is tempting to blur the harsh edges of today's texts. But instead, I would like to try to describe the "Home" for which God made us - a home that is real, powerful and life giving – not unreal, saccharine sweet and temporary.

When Isaiah sings a lament over God's vineyard, he pulls back the curtain on the people who considered themselves God's chosen. Isaiah sings to the nation of Judah, where the temple stood proudly in Jerusalem as proof of God's love and choice of the people as God's own. And Isaiah sings of a God who has loved and planted and tended and provided for those who are claimed and loved. Isaiah sings of the investment of the owner in the vineyard and of how – despite all of the investment, tending and care – the vineyard has not responded or borne fruit. God loved and invested and tended the vineyard – the people of God – because God had a purpose for that people. They were to bear fruit – good grapes. This is consistent with all of Scripture. God created all that is and breathed life into human beings with the clear and stated intention of having all that God created be blessed and loved and tended. God's people were "called to be a blessing" to the whole earth. (Genesis 12:2) God's people were never created or blessed for their own benefit. God's people have always been blessed for a purpose – God's purpose. And God's purpose is to be a blessing to the whole earth – to reconcile the world to God's own love. So, when we are welcomed home – to God's home – one of the first things Scripture reminds us of is that everything that we have and everything that we are is a purposeful and undeserved Gift from a God who has a plan for the whole of creation to be blessed.

We are not welcomed home to a place that exists to serve us and our comfort and security. We are welcomed home to be the vineyard that produces good grapes.

And when Jesus speaks these very difficult words of division and fire to his followers, it is difficult to understand. This is the same Jesus who – just a few verses earlier – tells his disciples "do not worry" (Luke 12:22). God knows what we need and will provide it, so that we can be free to seek and to work for God's Kingdom. How can these words co-exist with Jesus' words "do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32)? Could this be the same Jesus about whom the angels who announced his birth said, "I bring you good news of a great joy for all the people?" (Luke 2:10)

The clear and unambiguous answer of Scripture is – Yes, it is the same God, the same Jesus and the same eternal purpose. We prefer to focus on the verses that make us feel good, and to pray only to "Little tiny, newborn, infant Jesus" (to use Ricky Bobby's prayer from the movie Talladega Nights). We prefer pancakes and sausage to thinking of ourselves facing the fire. But, to welcome us all home, says Scripture, requires that we understand that our eternal home is organized not around our own comfort, security or privilege. Our eternal home – the purpose for which we have been created and given so many gifts – is God's purpose. Our eternal home – our God given purpose is to reconcile the world to God. Until we know that, acknowledge that and seek that purpose, then we will not understand God, ourselves or the future. To be

welcomed home by God is to decide – without reservation – to seek first God’s purpose for our lives and the world.

When Jesus says that he knows that he will be baptized with fire and he is not talking about what we first think of when we feel stressed or distressed. The Greek here connotes more the complete absorption of Jesus in the mission for which he was sent. Jesus is not unaware of what will happen when he gets to Jerusalem. And, it is important for us to remember that - far from being a picture of Jesus calling down fire and brimstone on someone else – what Jesus here is saying is that he knows and is willingly walking towards a baptism of fire. Jesus is not killed by the Roman Government – a victim of political division. Jesus gives his life, knowing that his disciples will scatter, Peter will deny him and that his death will cause conflict and force the world to decide what they believe about God.

God did not send Jesus into the world to validate our human institutions or to bless our “business as usual”. Jesus has come into the world to tell us and then to show us what God’s Kingdom is about. Jesus goes to Jerusalem – willingly – to suffer a baptism of fire before us – NOT TO SAVE US FROM SUFFERING – but in solidarity with our own suffering and to show us the way to serve God’s purpose. Jesus’ death on the cross does not save us from suffering. Jesus’ death on the cross shows us the depths of the love that God has for us and the absolute commitment to accomplish the coming of God’s Kingdom. To be welcomed home into the Kingdom of God, we must decide if we are willing to also give ourselves to the purposes of God.

So, today we are all welcomed home. And we are invited to approach this communion table – where we remember the division and death and sacrifice to which Jesus willingly submitted – so that we might know the depths of God’s love for us, the lengths to which God will go to accomplish the reconciliation of the world, and the absolute power of the Kingdom of God over the Kingdoms of earth. We come to this table, not as those who have earned a position of power or authority, not as those who are morally superior or theologically wiser than those who do not come. But we come to this table in the full knowledge that we are – every one of us – gifted by God, tended by God, loved by God and called by God – but still not bearing grapes, still not serving justice, still loving ourselves and our own comfort more than we love the Kingdom of God.

To be welcomed home means that we must drop every pretense of worth that depends on our own holiness and our own goodness to be able to receive the love, reconciliation and life that God wants to give us. The suffering of letting go of all that the world values will not compare to the riches of the kingdom, the fruit of the vineyard that God has designed. Jesus has shown us the way, and now calls us to follow him home.