

HOMeward BOUND

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 107:1-7; James 5:13-20

“You should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

James 5:20

Somewhere out there, on the bumper of one of America’s cars, is a sticker with this slogan: “You are a child of God. Please phone home.”

It gets the point across, doesn’t it?

For me, that bumper sticker conjures up an image of God as a Jewish mother. Maybe you’ve heard the old joke about a son who calls his mother on the phone. As soon as she hears his voice, she launches into a maternal tirade:

“So, you couldn’t call sooner? I know what you’ll say... You’ll say, ‘I was busy.’ So, look at the big hotshot! Is he too busy to pick up the phone and call his poor, aged mother? Too busy to find out how she’s doing? Weeks go by; I never hear from you. Is it so hard to call your mother occasionally?”

After a few minutes of this, the son catches on. Finally, when there’s a break in the conversation, he interrupts: “OK, Mom, I get it. So, how have you been?”

To which she replies, “Ahh... Better not to ask!”

But seriously... the Bible's rife with illustrations of how much God desires to be in relationship with us. The problem is... so often the children of humanity are like the son in the story I've just told. We're not all good at keeping in touch with the Almighty.

Well, at least it's not a new problem! And how do I know that? By reading the letter of James:

“My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”
[James 5:19-20]

Even in the first centuries of the church, there were those who heard the gospel message, then wandered away for a time. These prodigal Christians are of great concern to the author of this biblical letter. He wants his readers to go out, locate them, and bring them back to the fellowship.

Jesus tells a few parables about this sort of thing, as you may recall. He speaks of a lost sheep, who wanders away from the flock. What does the shepherd do, but leave the ninety-nine other sheep grazing on the hillside, and set out after the one that's lost?

Then there's the woman with ten silver coins, who loses one of them. Immediately she lights a lamp, takes up her broom, and sweeps out every nook and

cranny of the house: hoping against hope that her broom will turn up the lost coin.

Finally, there's that famous Parable of the Prodigal Son: the tale of a young fool who demands his inheritance before his father even dies, squanders it, then comes crawling back, hoping for some measure of forgiveness. Dad surprises both his sons – not to mention the world at large — by embracing his faithless son with open arms, showering him with unconditional love. [Luke 15]

We're at that time in the church year when worship attendance is on the rise, after all those summer vacations are ended. It does my heart good to see so many faces out there, once again. But as a pastor in my first year, I've heard some of you mention the names of others who are not here — those who were once active in the life and work of this congregation, but have drifted away.

James has an interesting name for these people, in the portion of his letter I read for you a little while ago. He calls them “wanderers.” The Greek word refers not only to those who get distracted and lose the trail, but also to those who are intentionally deceived by someone else.

Have you ever been a wanderer, at some time in your spiritual life? Do you what it's like to wake up and come to the same realization the prodigal son discovered there in the pigsty, just before he headed for home? Maybe you know the same fear and trepidation he felt, not knowing what to expect at the hand of his

father.

So, how do we fulfill James' advice, and lead the wanderers home? How do we make this church the sort of place where spiritual seekers feel at home?

Let me suggest three ways.

The first is terribly simple — so simple as to seem obvious: we need to extend a greeting to those seekers who've already come through our doors.

That's not always the easiest thing for Christians to do. Some of us are naturally shy. Some of us are so preoccupied with our own concerns, we may not notice the person who's sitting near us. Some of us are afraid of accidentally extending a welcome to someone who's been here all along, whom we just don't happen to know — and who may not appreciate being mistaken for a newcomer.

Yet, in truth, an honest, heartfelt greeting is something everyone enjoys. Most first-time visitors to worship are yearning for a welcome: "Is this a friendly church?" they want to know. "Is there a place for me here?" A smile and a handshake go a long way towards helping guests feel at home. As for the fear of welcoming someone who's not a newcomer, but a longtime member — that's easily remedied. Just don't say, "Welcome to our church" or ask, "Is this your first time here?" Just say, "I'm not sure we've had the chance to get acquainted, my

name is _____.” No one could possibly feel offended at that!

(Oh, and if you should happen to see a person you do know, but who’s been away from church for a long time — one of those wanderers James is talking about — there’s one thing you should avoid doing at all costs. *Don’t gush*. Don’t say, “Heyyyy, long time no see!” in your loudest voice. A simple, “Good to see you” is more than sufficient.)

The old-time evangelist Sam Shoemaker used to refer to certain long-established churches as “aquariums.” He would cite Jesus’ famous teaching about his disciples needing to be “fishers of people.” Then he’d point out that many followers of Jesus, in long-established churches like ours, are more like “keepers of the aquarium” than “fishers of people.”

An aquarium is a closed system. It’s a beautiful thing to look at, but aquarium fish just swim round and round, enjoying one another’s company (or so we presume). Far better, for the sake of the gospel, to be venturing out into the open ocean, encountering and greeting newcomers to whom God — unbeknownst to us — has been speaking.

So, that brings us to the second thing we all ought to be doing, to welcome the wanderers home: we need to listen.

Most people, when they hear the word “evangelism,” think it’s all about talking. It’s Billy Graham in a football stadium. It’s one of those wild-eyed true believers on a Manhattan street corner, buttonholing total strangers with a canned spiel: a tight little salvation formula they repeat to everyone.

“More power to the people who can do that,” you may be thinking — “but it’s not for me.”

I remember hearing a talk once, by Ben Campbell Johnson, who used to teach evangelism at Columbia Theological Seminary. He told of meeting a woman once, at a church conference, who asked him what he did for a living.

“I’m a seminary professor,” said Ben.

“Really?” said the woman, sounding very interested. “What do you teach?”

“I teach evangelism.”

There was a long pause. “Oh,” said she, “and I thought you were such a nice man!”

What is it about the way evangelism is so often done, that’s given it such a bad name?

I’ll tell you what it is. It’s the one-way nature of the communication. Something’s missing in that person-to-person encounter. What’s missing is: listening.

Listening, as Henri Nouwen says, is at the heart of hospitality:

“To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.” [From *Bread for the Journey*, 1997]

So, if we begin with greeting, and continue through listening, what’s next?

You’ve probably guessed it by now. It’s an invitation.

If you’ve already greeted, and already listened, then I guarantee you, an invitation will be welcomed. And what do we invite another person to?

The answer is: something small. If the conversation is happening here in the Sanctuary, it could be, “Come back with me to the coffee hour.” If it’s somewhere else, it could be, “You know, I think you’d like our church. Would you like to come with me this Sunday, as my guest?”

You can see in the New Testament that this is so often how Jesus did it. Meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, he says, “Would you mind getting me a

drink?” (Because Jews rarely asked such a question of Samaritans, it was a truly friendly overture.) Looking up at the tax collector Zacchaeus, perched high in his sycamore tree, “Jesus says, come down from there, Zacchaeus, I’m going to accept your invitation to dinner tonight (actually, Zacchaeus hadn’t offered — most people in that culture wouldn’t be caught dead at a tax collector’s dinner party — but Jesus’ offer to spend time with him was a true gesture of kindness).

Are you afraid of extending an invitation to church because you fear being thought of as pushy? God knows, there’s enough pushy evangelism going on out there that it’s understandable that someone would feel that way. But remember, the invitation doesn’t come first. It comes only after the greeting and the listening. If you’ve greeted well and listened with patience and genuine interest, I can just about guarantee the invitation won’t be resented.

Greeting... listening... and a modest invitation. These are tools of evangelism. Begin with these simple techniques, and who can say how God may bless the encounters that are to come?

Let me close with a story – a fable, of sorts. It comes from the Jewish tradition. It’s a story about a man who left his own home to seek the great city of light far away. He walked and walked all day, until just before the sun went down.

Then, he found a likely place to camp for the night. The last thing he did before going to bed was to place his shoes on the ground, facing in the direction he was headed; that way, he figured he'd set out in the right direction the next morning.

In the middle of the night, though, something happened. A stranger came along and turned the man's shoes around. In the morning, he awoke, put on his shoes and set out on his journey again: toward the great city of light — or so he thought. He walked and walked all day, until — just before sunset — he looked up ahead and saw a city that looked rather familiar to him. He entered through the city gate, and found a neighborhood that also looked rather familiar to him. He entered the neighborhood, and came to a house that looked like a place he knew. He entered into the house... and he lived happily ever after.

The journey of faith is always the journey homeward. There are times in life when you or I may wander, sometimes aimlessly, but when God truly gets hold of our lives and begins to direct us, we find ourselves headed in a homeward direction. For it is there — in our hearts, in our homes, in the familiar places of our lives — that God has been active all along.

The work of evangelism is helping others to turn their shoes around: to cease their wandering and to head in a homeward direction. The sort of welcome travelers receive, when they finally arrive home again, can make all the difference.

In the well-known words of the poet T.S. Eliot,

**“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.”**

[“Little Gidding,” pt. 5, *Four Quartets* (1942).]

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