

PENTECOST 3B – June 10th 2018

You Can't Go Home Again

(Mark 3:20-35)

I had a couple of interesting experiences this past week. On Monday, I officiated at the funeral for Dean Poulsen's mother over at the Clayton & McGirr Funeral Home. (Of course, as most of you know, Dean was our former Minister of Music here at Hope.)

Anyway, as I was out in the hallway, just prior to the service, I was suddenly approached by a woman who wanted to know if I had perhaps grown up in her neighborhood. It turns out that she worked there at the funeral home, and when she saw my name and that I would be doing Mrs. Pohlsen's funeral, it rang a bell for her. And so she decided to seek me out and ask.

Long story short, it turns out that we *did not*, in fact, grow up in the very same neighborhood. But, through our conversation, she realized that, as a child, she had attended Hope Christian School, and also that my mom, therefore, had been her teacher. And so, as it turns out, *that's* why my last name rang a bell.

Moreover, when she told me *her* maiden name, I immediately recognized it, as well, since one of her older brothers graduated a year *ahead* of me in high school. And another brother was a year *behind* me.

Well, as our brief conversation, there in the hallway, came to a close, she then asked me how it felt to come back home to Freehold; as I had explained to her that I had moved away right after graduating from college. Not surprisingly, it's a question I've gotten countless times

over the past 10 months. And I usually answer, as I did in this instance, that I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience, which is the truth. But, as I often add, there is much that has also *changed* during those 39 years I was away. I may be back home, but home is not really the same place it was when I left it...

Then, on Thursday evening, I got together again with a group of high school friends for some pizza at Federici's. (I think I've mentioned this before.) It's something that we have done now *four times* since I've been back in town. The occasion this time was that one of our classmates was up visiting from Florida. And what made this gathering even more significant was that barely a year ago there had been a fire in his kitchen at home. Somehow he had fallen down, was knocked out, and suffered significant injury to his lungs from smoke inhalation. If his son had not rescued him, he would have undoubtedly died in that fire. But, even so, the doctors told his wife, at the time, that he would never walk or breathe again on his own. In fact, in the hospital he even spent about a week in a drug-induced coma in order to give his damaged lungs a chance to begin to heal.

And so the miracle we celebrated with him last Thursday was that he had proven those doctors wrong. He was the same fidgety, high energy, mile-a-minute talker that I remembered from high school. Just a little grayer and a little heavier; like the rest of us...

Well, anyway, since Vince had been a wrestler back in high school, they had also invited his former coach to join us Thursday night. Gunther Schmiedel – some of you may recognize the name – was a long-time and very successful wrestling coach over at the township, and he had been one of my assistant football coaches there as well. In fact, as we were

reminiscing at dinner, Coach Schmiedel brought up the name of the former *head* football coach; commenting on what a great guy he was. No argument there from me.

But then, I don't know exactly why, or what prompted me, I responded by saying that I thought Coach Bluhm had made some mistakes, and that we might have won more games if he had done some things differently. I specifically brought up the fact that, just prior to the season, Coach Bluhm had toyed with the idea of moving me from tackle to fullback. But then he had abandoned that plan once the season started.

However, during an intrasquad scrimmage near the end of the season, pitting the seniors against the underclassmen, I finally got the chance to play fullback; *my dream!* And, even more than that, I ran wild that afternoon, amassing over a hundred yards rushing as we trounced the underclassmen, prompting Coach Bluhm to actually come up to me after the game and say, "Maybe we *should have* played you at fullback after all."

Did you ever have a moment or situation in your life that you wish had turned out differently? Well, this was one of those moments for me.

What if I *had* been moved to fullback my senior year, and had become a star runner, plastered all over the sports pages of the Asbury Park Press? After all, at 6'2" and 175 pounds I was probably better *suited* to playing in the backfield instead of on the line back then; even though I *was* voted first team All-District and honorable mention All-County as a lineman...

I have to confess, it was one of those unfulfilled dreams people sometimes have that then bothered me for several years afterwards. Eventually, though, I made my peace with how things turned out, got over it, and moved on with my life. In fact, I hadn't thought about it for a very long time... until Thursday night, that is.

And, I guess, the reason *why* I brought it up to Coach Schmiedel the other night was that I was hoping that he would somehow understand, and say something like, "You know, you're right. We probably made a mistake there. I wish it had turned out differently for you." That's all he had to say. That's all I was looking for, I think.

Instead, he looked back at me, got very serious, and said, "Some things are just never meant to be, Ed. You can't look back and change the past. You have to move on."

Now I think my face probably flushed with embarrassment at that moment. In fact, I'm sure it did. I'm also sure that he probably meant well. But I felt like I was being lectured at; to be perfectly honest with you. And it was obvious that he had totally misunderstood where I was coming from, and simply assumed that I had never gotten over that moment and was still *reliving* the past. Instead of seeing that I was just looking for a little understanding and affirmation from my former coach. Maybe that was asking for too much...

Well I was a little ticked off as I drove home that night.... But as I thought about it some more before going to bed, I began to cool down and accept the wisdom that there *was* in those words. Although I think Coach Schmeidel totally misread the situation, what he said was

nevertheless true. You *can't* go back. You *can't* change or relive the past.

In fact, author Thomas Wolfe once wrote a novel that explored this very point. It was entitled "You Can't Go Home Again." Not literally, of course. You actually *can* go home, right? After all, I did.

No, what that phrase actually means is that you can't *recover* the past. Or, as someone once put it: "If you try to return to a place you remember from the past it won't be the same as you remember it." Places change. And, more importantly, so do people.

Apparently there's a point near the end of the novel, where the main character makes the following observation: "You can't go back to your family, back home to your childhood... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and fame... back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time..."

Well... bear with me here... I share all this with you because, in a roundabout sort of way, I think, it helps us to understand the context and the dynamics of today's gospel reading. Verse twenty of Mark 3, you see, actually begins mid-sentence with the words: "and the crowd came together again..." But fortunately, the lectionary includes the final words of verse nineteen for us this morning as well: "Jesus went home..." (Technically it says, "Then he went home.")

Jesus went home... Since beginning his ministry, after being baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, called

his first disciples, performed some healings, began a preaching tour throughout Galilee, did some more healings, answered questions about why he was doing what he was doing, healed some *more* people, taught in front of large crowds along the Sea of Galilee, and appointed the twelve apostles. And now he has *finally* come back home for, presumably, the very first time since embarking on this ministry.

And what does *he* discover? Ironically, Jesus himself discovers the very same thing that Thomas Wolfe wrote about in his novel; namely that you can't go home again... Not even if your name is Jesus.

A crowd is surrounding him, we hear. A massing of people so great that there is no opportunity even to eat. His enormous popularity is provoking a crisis, writes NT scholar Donald Juel.

And, since this *is* his hometown, we have to assume that this crowd included many of those who knew him back when as well. In other words, the crowd included folks who knew Jesus all the while he was growing up.

And what are they saying about this boy they knew back when, who trained under his father Joseph as a carpenter, but who now – as a full grown man – has become this famous preacher, teacher, and healer who is going around saying that the kingdom of God is at hand? To put it bluntly, as Mark does here, they are saying: “He’s gone out of his mind.” He’s flipped his wig. He’s gone off the deep end.

So disturbing is his behavior, apparently, that his family – Jesus’ own family, mind you – went out to what? Congratulate him? No, to restrain him! Another way of translating this is to say that they went to *seize*

him. As Donald Juel, again, observes, "...according to Mark, Jesus' relatives come to lay hold of him because they fear he is insane."

His neighbors think he's flipped his lid. His family wants to seize him. And then, says Mark, the scribes, the religious experts, who have come from Jerusalem also weigh in. Their conclusion? He's not mad. He's possessed!

"He has Beelzebul," they say, "and by the ruler of demons he casts *out* demons." Jesus, of course, points out how ridiculous and illogical this charge is. After all, he says, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

But, as we heard, the issue is by no means resolved. Mark tells us that Jesus' family came to the place where he was staying, and standing outside, they called for him. And those who were sitting around Jesus relayed the message, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."

And here's where we get to the heart of the matter, so to speak; to the main point. "Who *are* my mother and my brothers?" he asks them. And then, looking around at those sitting there beside him, Jesus says, "*Here* are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the *will of God* is my brother and sister and mother."

It's a pretty astounding thing to say, isn't it? After all, we know from the Gospel of John that he never abandoned Mary, his mother, but instead, from the cross, entrusted her to the care of the disciple whom he loved. And we know from the book of Acts that at least *one* of his brothers, later became a leader in the early church.

So this is not a literal or permanent break with his family. Although it definitely appears that they are somewhat skeptical and a little concerned about what he's up to here early on in his ministry... to say the least.

But there's another dynamic at work here, isn't there? Your family, your blood relatives, they're still family. But now there's a new definition of family as well; a new dimension, if you will. Family, for Jesus, is a term that now *also* applies to those who have decided to join him in his ministry, as crazy as it appears to some at this point. And to all those who are willing to join with him in seeking to live out and to do God's will.

But my point here this morning is simply this: Even Jesus couldn't go home again, could he? As Thomas Wolfe wrote in his novel, "You can't go back to your family, back home to your childhood..." For Jesus, of course, everything has changed now since his baptism and since embarking upon his ministry of proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. He is no longer the carpenter's son they watched grow up in their midst.

Nor can you go "back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame..." Of course, we don't know anything at all about any dreams Jesus may have had while growing up, or if he even had them. But it's not a stretch for us to think that those *around him* growing up, including his own family, may have had certain hopes and dreams and expectations that did not *at all* include the dramatic turn his life took when he waded into the Jordan to be baptized by John.

And, most of all, as Wolfe observed, you can't go "back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time." Earlier, in Chapter 2 of Mark, Jesus says to those who questioned his behavior and that of his disciples in relation to the laws and traditions of the Jewish faith, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made," said Jesus. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

In other words, Jesus is attracting such a following and making such a big ruckus because he's breaking with tradition and challenging all the norms. But that's what the breaking in of God's kingdom is all about, we discover. Their beloved religious traditions must have seemed, for many, if not most, to be everlasting. But Jesus was all about change.

No, he *couldn't* go home again. At least, not in the sense of being the same person he was *before* his baptism in the Jordan and embarking upon his ministry. Nor in the sense of trying to somehow relive or preserve the past.

Instead, something new, something revolutionary, was taking place through Jesus and his ministry. And precisely *for* that reason, here early on *in* that ministry, Jesus discovers that he can't go home again; in fact, nothing will ever be the *same* again – certainly not him and not his hometown either...

Those two experiences I had this past week, first at the funeral home and then later in the week at Federici's, brought home for me the realization

that you can't go home again because the place you left will never be the same when you return. Nor can you go home again, in terms of reliving your past.

Coach Schmeidel said to me, "You can't look back... You have to move on."

For Jesus, this was true as well. Once he set out on his ministry, he never looked back. Instead he pressed on, despite the fact that people – even people close to him, as we heard this morning, even his own family – didn't understand why he was doing the things he was doing or saying the things he was saying.

In fact, *nothing* would deter him. Ultimately, not even the cross...

You see, what's true for all of us, was also true for Jesus – you can't go home again. The good news, however, is that, because *Jesus* couldn't go home again, we don't have to live in the past either. Our following Jesus into the future is even better!

Amen.