

What Every Child Wants to Hear by Holly Aastuen
September 13, 2009 Luke 10: 38-42

It was 1981 and I had just spent a semester abroad at the University of Cambridge in England. But now Christmas was nearing and I was eager to go home and spend it with my family.

My flight to Chicago was on a Friday and even though England had been blanketed by 5 inches of snow that Tuesday, roads were now open, school was back in session and planes, though delayed, were getting in and out of the airport. I got to the airport on Friday only to find that my flight was postponed until Saturday.

That night in the airport I met a fellow traveler, Julie, also from Minneapolis, who told me the rumor that a labor dispute was going on between the airport and its snow plow operators, who had little negotiating power unless there was snow on the ground. The snow plow operators had gone on strike.

On Saturday around noon we got word that our flight was now postponed until 10:30pm. Around midnight we were told that no more flights were going out and British Airways put us up in a hotel.

The next morning we got to the airport just in time to hear the boarding announcement. My friend, Julie, and I were at the end of the line of 400 people originally scheduled to go on the flight and the last 12 of us were bumped off the flight so that the plane would have enough fuel to circle O'Hare Airport in Chicago if needed.

While our luggage went off to Chicago, the 12 of us were put up in a hotel for a second night.

By this time, Julie's parents had booked us on a Northwest Airlines flight from Gatwick Airport direct to Minneapolis. So on Monday morning we arrived at Gatwick Airport to find that the terminal was temporarily closed due to a gas leak. After 20 minutes of waiting, during which we were assured that the planes would wait for their passengers, we dashed through the airport to find our airplane pulling away from the terminal.

Finally, Braniff Airlines took pity on us, flew us to Dallas and with a quick transfer to Minneapolis we arrived in advance of our luggage which was still on our original flight that had been delayed yet again.

Minneapolis Airport never looked so good. After four days and three nights of delays, poor sleep and little food, I almost kissed the snow-covered ground. It was good to be back with my people who wouldn't let a lousy 5 inches of snow delay a flight for days. I was finally home!

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On this Welcome Home Sunday, some of us are back from long stretches of absences this summer that took us around the country, visiting and vacationing in far flung places, having wonderful experiences.

Some of us have been absent for other reasons and are now resolving to get back to regular attendance at church. Some of us have had our home church close and are looking for a new spiritual home.

All of us here this morning have known times of exile, of being away from the place we call home, of being separated from those we love. It's never easy, those times away, yet when we are finally home again, the reunion with those we love is sweet.

When we think of this Sunday, this "Welcome Home Sunday" we celebrate the welcome we receive from the family of God. We celebrate that each of us is a child of God and each of us is welcome here regardless of who we are and what we've done. All are welcome.

On this Welcome Home Sunday we also need to remember people who are spiritually homeless, who are seeking a church home, a place where they can be welcomed and received.

We've already talked this morning about people who are down on their luck, who need assistance from the St. Louis Park Emergency Program, and about the program itself as it seeks to find a new, permanent, home.

But I want us to take some time this morning to think about our spiritual home—where we find we are most welcomed and find support and encouragement for our spiritual life. Many people don't have a spiritual home of their own. We need to think of those people we care about, the people we work with, or talk with in our neighborhood, and ask ourselves if there might be some way that we can invite them to join us, to invite them to find their spiritual home.

Just as in today's Bible story, Martha and Mary each welcomed Jesus into their home and made him feel welcome, each in their own way, we need to welcome others who may be looking for a place to rest. We need to share in words and deeds the sentiment that every child of God wants to hear: Welcome Home!

Now I have heard many a person say, perhaps you have, too, "Well, I'm spiritual, not religious." And these days I find myself wondering, what does that mean anyway? What does it mean to be spiritual and not religious? Where do you find your spiritual home? How does that spiritual life get sustained? How do you express your spiritual life?

The church may have its faults, but it is the physical manifestation of God's love on earth. God didn't write a dreamy spiritual Valentine in the clouds, "Hello world.

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I love you.” Instead God sent love in the flesh, in the man of Jesus who dwelt among us and gave us a physical manifestation of that love.¹

In the same way the church, though flawed, is the physical manifestation of God’s love. The church, the people called Christians, is the love of God incarnate, in the flesh, the representation of Christ in the world, loving the world.

Being spiritual, not religious, forgets that God is not just found in prayer and meditation and fasting, God is also found in serving the poor and helping third graders with their Sunday School craft project. God is found in the church, and though God is not found exclusively in church, it is still the best place to reliably find and nurture a life in Christ.

God’s command is that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves. Often we find ourselves distracted by the trivial things in life so that we don’t do either one. Jesus has come to visit us in our home, come to speak to us in the midst of life. Let us, like Mary, sit at his feet and listen to his Word that gives us life. Then, having heard the word, let us, like Martha, get up and serve others so that they, too, can hear the words ‘Welcome Home.’

¹ Rev. Dr. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology in a sermon dated July 22, 2007.