

## “Homecoming”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
COTS, The Villages, FL  
May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Luke 4:16-30, John 2:1-11, Mark 2:1-12

Gracie Allen died, George Burns

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

‘Last letter to George Burns’, as quoted in Two Minutes for God : Quick Fixes for the Spirit (2007) Peter B. Panagore

Around 2003, Ron Buford new slogan for the UCC

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”

And that is where the “Comma” symbol comes

Reading scripture can be that way – we can read it and still find something new,

In our first lesson today from Luke 4,

Jesus returns to the town where he had grown up.

following his vision-quest in the desert and initial success  
preaching in other villages round about.

Isa. 61:1

Acknowledging the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

he would proclaim hope to poor people,

amnesty for the captive, insight for the proud,

he would heal in order to show forgiveness,

and show the way to a hopeful future.

He reads beautifully and impresses the people at the synagogue,

but then, someone says, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Haven’t we heard it said, ‘You can’t really go home again’ –

you can’t go home and expect to see things the way they were

when you were a child.

Some things stay the same, some things change ,

and some things will never change.

Jesus’ homecoming seems nostalgic at first as everyone complements him,

but then someone says something to put this hometown boy

back in his place.

Jesus’ identity was formed at his baptism, tested in the desert of temptation,

and proven as he called forth to his first disciples.

Once again, his identity was challenged, by those who would keep him in a box.

Carpenter's son or question of legitimacy -either way, suggests why Jesus responds with anger and irony, yet also giving them a lesson about inclusivity.

When I went to seminary in the mid1980s,  
commitment to use inclusive language.

Simple courtesy - 'widows in Israel' to 'woman who was widowed...in Lebanon'.  
'a person who is physically challenged' instead of saying, 'a cripple'.

Making room for others – welcoming them to your home.

When Jesus refers to Lebanon and Syria, they try to kill him –  
they tried to put a period, while God was still speaking.

The second lesson is from John Chapter 2, which describes a wedding at Cana.

Mary learns that the party has just run out of wine, and Jesus says to her ,  
“Mother, what do you want me to do about it?”

But we get a glimpse of Mary's character –

In the hour he was needed, his mother was there to help  
like a mother bird pushing her baby out of the nest to fly.

Who has that been for you? Who has been a nurturing presence in your life?

Who has been a 'mother' to you?

Mother's Day can be very emotional for some people

who feel left out because they never had children,

or the relationship with their children was troubled.

Perhaps reminder that their mother has passed on,

or had a poor relationship, or grew up without a mother.

But is there not someone in everyone's life who serves in that role

of prompting us when we might otherwise give up?

Who was there in your hour of need to help you become who you are today?

I tell this story of the wedding differently in context of Luke 4 rejection.

But there is also humor – what are they going to do with 150 gallons of wine?

Jesus achieves his first miracle and becomes someone remarkable.

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”

In the third lesson from Mark Chapter 2, Jesus' homecoming

to his mother's home – now in Capernaum on the coast of the Sea of Galilee.

The word is out that Jesus is not only a great speaker,

but he can do amazing things.

4 people so desperate to help their friend who is paralyzed

they climb up on the roof and tear down to make a hole for the stretcher.

In the story of Jesus' baptism,  
the heavens open up for the Holy Spirit to come down to bless Jesus.  
In the call of Nathaniel, Jesus speaks about how the heavens will open  
and the angels of God ascend and descend.  
In this story, it is the roof of Jesus' home that is torn open and  
friends of a paralyzed person who – like angels,  
climbed up to lower their loved one down through the roof.  
God is still speaking to us.

What have been those times in your life when you risked sharing what you love,  
only to be discouraged, dispirited, and disheartened?  
When did someone stand up to remind you that you could do it –  
that you could face whatever the challenge was before you?  
Who has that been for you? And where do you think they came from?  
For whom, do you need to be that voice of hope?  
*“Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”*  
Happy Mothers' Day! Amen

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Luke 4:16-30, John 2:1-11, Mark 2:1-12

It is said that after his wife, Gracie Allen died,  
George Burns found a note from her, which read,  
"Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

'Last letter to George Burns', as quoted in Two Minutes for God : Quick Fixes for the Spirit (2007) Peter B. Panagore

They had been together for many years –  
not only as a couple, but as a vaudevillian comedy team.  
George was the straight man for Gracie's antics –  
which were actually very clever.

So, George Burns must have been very touched to get that message from Gracie,  
"Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

Around 2003, a marketing executive and member of the United Church of Christ,  
named Ron Buford was asked to come up with a new slogan for the UCC  
to restate our mission as a denomination.

He was inspired to take Gracie Allen's quote and add another phrase –  
"God is still speaking".

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking."  
And that is where the "Comma" symbol comes from when you see it used  
by the United Church of Christ.

Reading scripture can be that way – we can read it and still find something new,  
God can still say something new to us that speaks to our time and situation.  
And we have an example of this in scripture itself.

In our first lesson today from Luke 4,  
Jesus comes home to Nazareth – the town where he had grown up,  
following his vision-quest in the desert and initial success  
preaching in other villages round about.

He goes to the synagogue in where they all know him and  
he gets up to read a passage from Isaiah – the first verse of Chapter 61,  
which would also have been familiar to the people there.

But Jesus must have read it in such a way, that they didn't just hear it –  
they listened – because they were speechless.

He says these words as if they were his own – and as the Son of God, they were!  
In these words of the Book of Isaiah, Jesus establishes his mission.

Willard, p.2

Acknowledging the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,  
he would proclaim hope to poor people,  
amnesty for the captive, insight for the proud,  
to heal in order to show forgiveness,  
and promise a hopeful future.

He reads beautifully and impresses the people at the synagogue,  
but then, someone says, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Haven’t we heard it said, ‘You can’t really go home again’ –  
you can’t go home and expect to see things the way they were  
when you were a child.

Some things stay the same, some things change ,  
and some things will never change.

Jesus’ homecoming seems nostalgic at first as everyone complements him,  
but then someone says something to put this hometown boy  
back in his place.

Jesus’ identity was formed at his baptism, tested in the desert of temptation,  
and proven as he called forth to his first disciples.

Once again, his identity was challenged,  
but this time by those who would keep him in a box they labeled for him  
way back when, by their small-town thinking –  
they closed their minds and put a period there, while God was still talking.

His father was a carpenter – a working-class man and in traditional societies,  
that would determine what the son’s career would be –  
expecting him to follow in his father’s footsteps.

But Jesus shows up and speaks dynamically – like he is a big time rabbi,  
and so, ‘they’ – the anonymous ‘they’, give him a knock  
perhaps out of envy, or just to test him – “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Then there is the possibility they were reminding him  
of the circumstances of his birth – questioning his legitimacy.

Either way, this would suggest why Jesus responds to them in the way he does –  
with anger and irony, yet also giving them a lesson about inclusivity.

When I went to seminary in the mid1980s,  
my school had a commitment to use inclusive language.

At first I thought this was just switching ‘she’ for ‘he’,  
but then I realized this was a challenge to be more eloquent about God.  
This had broader implications for how we include or exclude groups of people  
by the words we use.

When this is applied in the wider world, we think of it as ‘politically correct’ –  
but really it is just simple courtesy.

Willard, p.3

The older text in Greek has Jesus speaking about the 'widows in Israel',  
but then he uses more inclusive language when referring to  
the 'woman who was widowed...in Lebanon'.

That is like the more politically correct way of describing,  
'a person who is physically challenged' instead of saying, 'a cripple'.  
By doing this, we remind ourselves we are speaking of a person.

When Jesus refers to Lebanon and Syria, he was trying to open their minds  
to realize God's favor was for all human beings,  
God is a God for the Universe and not just a tribal deity.  
But they were enraged to hear Jesus say that God could favor their enemies,  
they try to kill him – they tried to put a period, while God was still speaking.

The second lesson is from John Chapter 2, which describes a wedding at Cana,  
to which Jesus' mother, Mary, has been invited.

Jesus is also there with some friends.

Mary learns that the party has just run out of wine, and says this to Jesus.

But he says to her "Mother, what do you want me to do about it?"

But we get a glimpse of Mary's character and see that she is not  
one to be put off so easily – she doesn't take 'No' for an answer, and  
so she enlists the help of the servants.

Now, we understand Jesus, as God, is omnipotent, but he was also fully human.

What if he could be just as human as any one of us?

What if Jesus needed a push at this early stage of his mission as the Messiah –  
like any of us might in the face of stiff opposition?

In the hour he was needed, his mother was there to help  
like a mother bird pushing her baby out of the nest to fly.

Who has that been for you? Who has been a nurturing presence in your life?

Who has been a 'mother' to you?

This being Mothers' Day, it can be very emotional for some people  
who may feel left out because they never had children,  
or the relationship with their children was troubled.

Perhaps it is reminder that their mother has passed on,  
or they had a poor relationship with their mother,  
or grew up without a mother.

But is there not someone in everyone's life who serves in that role  
of prompting us when we might otherwise give up?

Who was there for you in your hour of need?

Who helped you become the person you are today?

Willard, p.4

When I tell the story of his homecoming to Nazareth in Luke Chapter 4,  
and then tell the story of the wedding at Cana in John Chapter 2,  
I keep in mind the rejection Jesus must have experienced,  
but also the occasion for his creative inspiration at the wedding.  
It comes about with the wonderfully humorous situation  
of the master of ceremonies being so pleasantly surprised by the new wine –  
which is excellent and not just the ‘cheap stuff’!  
Then again, what are they going to do with more than 150 gallons of wine?  
What a wedding present!  
So it is here that Jesus achieves his first miracle and becomes a celebrity,  
But there’s more to come – don’t put a period where God put a comma...

In the third lesson from Mark Chapter 2, Jesus returns to Capernaum  
another homecoming, this time to where he lives as an adult,  
staying at his mother’s house by the Sea of Galilee.  
By now the word is out that Jesus is a great speaker and can do amazing things.  
When a crowd has gathered there to hear him, four people show up with  
a paralyzed person on a stretcher.  
They’re hoping to get a healing for their friend,  
but they can’t get too close to where Jesus is inside the house.  
They are so desperate that they climb up on the roof and tear down into it  
to make a hole big enough to pass the stretcher through and get help...

In the story of Jesus’ baptism,  
the heavens opened up for the Holy Spirit to come down to bless Jesus.  
In the call of Nathaniel,  
Jesus says the heavens will open up and the angels will ascend and descend.  
In this story, it is the roof of Jesus’ home that is torn open and  
the friends of a paralyzed person who climb up to lower their friend down.  
We are like those who were also sitting there –  
questioning and fearful of change, but hopeful just the same.  
Jesus, in these stories, models for us the need we have to open up our minds,  
to open the skylight of our minds to the heavens,  
so that we can hear how God is still speaking to us.

What have been those times in your life when you risked sharing what you love,  
only to be discouraged, dispirited, and disheartened?  
When did someone stand up to remind you that you could do it –  
that you could face whatever the challenge was before you?  
Who has that been for you? For whom, do you need to be that voice of hope?  
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Happy Mothers’ Day! Amen