

When It's Time to Leave Home

Luke 4:16-30

Years ago, when I was a youth growing up in the church where my father was the pastor, I recall a less-than-stellar moment in my adolescence. It was Youth Sunday—the annual programming mistake my father and the church deacons would make to accommodate the younger generation. Those were the days when the ideal image for youth ministry was Pat Boone in a turtleneck crooning Kum-bay-ah, but what you got in the pulpit was the preacher's kid, who had shoulder-length hair and a recalcitrant attitude. Since the number of teens in the entire church totaled three, the choices were few and the results were predictable, year after year.

On this particular Youth Sunday, I was once again the chosen orator for my generation. Since I had already done it the year before in more conventional fashion, this time around I decided to dazzle them with one of my own musical compositions—a rendition of a song that I had written under the influence of adolescent hubris and three shakers of stupidity. At the time, I thought it was something akin to Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger, with a slight influence from Pink Floyd, but that was more in my imagination than reality. My production that morning was certainly esoteric, bordering on strange and inappropriate, but I was convinced it was prophetic and meant as a profound euphonious challenge from my generation to all those sleeping in the pews.

After I had finished, I recall thinking to myself that I had really nailed it and gotten my message across; everyone sat there in stunned silence, shaking their heads, with clear expressions of surprise and

perhaps even concern on their faces. Not being particularly astute at that age in reading human behavior, for the remainder of the service I basked in the afterglow with the ridiculous notion I had just said (or in this case sung) something sagacious and powerful that shook them and their conventional worldviews to the core and would radically alter the church forever!

However, after the service that perception quickly dissipated when my brother, Peter, came up to me laughing and mocking me playing my guitar, while my mother scurried over and uttered her usual, “Paul, you numbskull, what were you thinking? Didn’t you go over this with your father?” The short answer was No; I thought I knew better. So, the lasting memory of this High School truly Senior moment was of most people wondering why this idiot was allowed to be in the pulpit, while for me and my parents it was a reckoning that it was time for me to leave home. And that I did in a matter of months when I headed halfway across the country for college to everyone’s great joy and relief.

Most young people leave their homes with far deeper anguish and sentiment than did I. Their parents worry about them, mothers wail at their “babies” leaving the nest; bon voyage parties are planned with friends and relatives before they head off to work or college ten miles away from home. My departure, however, was more like an intercontinental ballistic missile launch in the middle of a late summer night, with a note taped to my boxes granting me permission to return home at the end of the semester. As my parents viewed it, the reward they received for my college education was four months at a time without their idiot son at home!

I can't blame them. Everyone reaches a point where the family house isn't large enough to safely harbor all the unfolding drama represented in a developing young adult. Distance is providential and useful to allow parent/child relationships to grow beyond periodic strangling into adult exchanges, where independence and responsibility provide young people the maturity needed to take ownership of their own life and vocation. Otherwise, great relationships can devolve into grating ones if there's not enough personal space for a young adult to figure out what life is like outside of the protective shelter of a parents' roof and checkbook. Just ask the parents of every twenty-something child who's still living at home. For everyone's wellbeing, leaving home isn't such a bad idea.

Dr. Marie Hartwell-Walker, in an article on preparing a child to leave home, offers this advice:

Can we really conscientiously and systematically teach every skill our children will need in adulthood? Probably not. But there do seem to be a few key issues. When kids are gradually taught how to manage time, money and possessions as well as how to relate well with others, they are much more likely to be successful adults.

What about self-esteem? People often argue that building self-esteem is more important than a clean bedroom or knowledge about how money works. I have found that positive self-esteem grows from feelings of competence. A positive self-image develops naturally as children learn how to get along with people and to get along in the world. Once set in motion, these areas become part of a wonderful positive loop: The more competent I feel, the better I feel about myself. The better I feel about myself, the more willing I am to take risks to develop more competence. And so on.

Families that have dedicated time and effort to skills building derive a great deal of confidence through this process of readying children to enter the adult world. Parents experience the satisfaction of knowing they have done their job and done it well. Kids feel self-assured and prepared for what lies ahead. For these families, a child's leaving home is not a

shock or an ending — it is simply the next logical step in a process that everyone has been working toward from the beginning.¹

So, how does one know a child is prepared for leaving home? Perhaps only when he/she no longer needs to be there.

All the normal family drama has some bearing on our text for today from Luke's Gospel, which is an account of when Jesus was severing his ties with his family and village—an incident that appeared to leave his neighbors and friends a bit perplexed, if not insulted, by his too-close-to-home proclamation. Obviously, it is meant to be more than an account of family drama; it's an important story revealing what Jesus perceived about his role and mission and why it was impossible for him to remain at home in Nazareth since locals couldn't view him as anything other than the man they already knew.

At first glance, it's easy to understand why Jesus's hometown became so angered and upset at his proclamation. As I learned early on, it's hard to possess the gravitas of a prophet with an audience that already knows you in more personal and less impressive ways. They know whose kid you are; they're quite familiar with your story, personality, and quirks. Familial relationships invariably tend to influence what is heard and perceived preventing recipients from taking to heart the message being delivered.

In Nazareth, Jesus was considered a local—a common laborer like most of them—perhaps even one targeted with complaint by some for not remaining at home with his own kinfolk and friends.

¹ Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed. D., "Preparing Children to Leave Home," <http://www.psychcentral.com>, 8 October 2018.

Who did Jesus think he was to come back and make himself out to be any more than Joseph's and Mary's firstborn son?

But personal issues aside, the real problem existed in how he portrayed himself. By reciting the familiar Isaiah 61 promise of God's ultimate deliverance of the poor and outcast of Israel, and then announcing that it was now fulfilled in him, they were expecting Jesus to step up and take on the prophetic mantle on their behalf. In his home synagogue, Jesus's neighbors and kinfolk were impressed with his message—this native son becoming quite a public phenomenon in Capernaum—but assumed he'd first take care of his own. In their view from the pew, *they* were the poor needing good news; *they* were the captives seeking release—the blind needing sight—the oppressed yearning to be free! They wanted this local boy to preach the word and tell them that God was on their side and was going to proclaim favor *to them!*

That's why they were delightfully pleased by Jesus's presentation. He was speaking to their hearts—it was the very reason why they were in the synagogue in the first place lifting up their cries for divine help, justice, and relief. Like most people, religion was their retreat from the daily grind. They wanted God to comfort them in their afflictions and to heal their wounds—to make their world better—to renew their lives and to replenish their souls. They were the ones in the sanctuary seeking God's help for their troubles, and then took delight in hearing that the messianic promise would now be fulfilled in their midst! First things first: Physician, heal thyself (and the rest of us at the same time)!

However, as we come to see, those who knew Jesus were among the least likely to be open to his good news. He was too close for them to grasp who he was. Hence, this is where another great biblical proverb is found: “No prophet is accepted in his own hometown.” Hometown prophets typically are not revered among those who know them best, since as divine messengers, they are still viewed with all their human flaws. Who wants to be held accountable by someone you know? That makes prophetic proclamation seem more like personal insult.

That alone would be sufficient as a reason for why Jesus couldn't remain at home. It also speaks to the truth that, in very real terms, religious sanctuaries usually are *non-prophet* settings—places where prophets are offensive to the listening ears. For a variety of reasons, prophets are best suited for people who are at an emotional distance from them, so that their challenging word looms greater than their actual presence. It's the primary distinction between the roles of prophet and pastor.

Unlike prophets, pastors are more at home in sanctuaries because they provide personal support and reassurance, encouragement and compassion, comforting the afflicted and soothing the souls of those close to home. That, however, is not the prophet's focus or work. Prophets operate out in the world addressing the larger issues challenging society for its injustices and sins. Pastors, on the other hand, address the spiritual wounds people suffer, offering the personal grace and mercy that heal the broken-hearted.

It's fair to say that in this story, Jesus's kinfolk and friends may have wanted him to be their pastor—to comfort them, not confront them—to stand with them, not before them as a provocative prophet. They saw Jesus so willing to do for others what he wouldn't do for them. That's why they turned on him and chased him out of town and why Jesus knew it was time to leave home.

The same distinction between these two roles exists today as well. Prophets make their impact because they unmask injustices, deplore tribal interests, and rage against the corrupt and the privileged. They also challenge the conventional mores and the personal preoccupations of people, directing attention toward those who are true victims in society while pointing out the spiritual deafness of those who remain cloistered in a sanctuary.

Prophets are the ones who find themselves in the crosshairs of violence because they shake the structures of society, speaking truth to power. Yet, prophets also are the ones who keep those of us in the sanctuary outwardly focused, away from our own self-preservation and toward those with whom God is calling us to be in solidarity. Prophets aren't meant for sanctuaries, just like sanctuaries aren't made for prophets. Yet, in this world, in these times, and in so many places, we need *both*.

To comfort the afflicted—that's the pastoral role, following the example of Jesus as the good Shepherd. It's why we need sanctuaries. People hurt and need a sanctuary to heal. We also must have prophets to afflict those who are comfortable with the state of the world—that's the prophet's mantle, following the example of Jesus

the troublemaker. We need both. That's where our faith and moral courage combine for something good.

As this story tells us, Jesus left home because he was called to be a prophet to his world as he encountered it. His was a calling quite different than his hometown rabbi. He had given Nazareth the best years of his life to that moment. Now it was time for him to give the best of his heart and soul for the world.

As I see it, there's a need and a purpose and a time for both the pastoral and the prophetic. Pastors share our lives, suffering with us; prophets challenge them and call us to be better. That is what makes our faith in God, our following of Jesus, and our witness to the Gospel so profoundly and poignantly compelling. Some of us never come to realize this until we've finally left home.

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