

"FINDING OUR WAY BACK HOME"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 16, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

If you've ever been accused of being a bit "absent-minded", you can take comfort in the fact that somewhere over in Norway, there's a young man by the name of Jermund Skogstad who is worse off than you and I may be.

For last year Jermund moved from the country into the city and rented an apartment. Thirty minutes after moving into his apartment, he stepped out for a bite to eat. By the time he found a cafe, he was hopelessly lost and had no idea how to get back home. Furthermore, he had forgotten the address of his new apartment. Fortunately, he had written the address on a card in his wallet, but unfortunately he had left his wallet behind in the new apartment.

The last I heard, Jermund had been searching for his apartment for a month. Believe it or not, he still hadn't found his way home. And that must be a terrible feeling...to lose your way home. I was forgot where I parked my car in this city, but after an hour's search and reflection, I found it.

Let's think about this theme here this morning...."finding our way back home". Father's Day is a good time to think about home. St. Paul in our reading from Second Corinthians writes of yearning for his "heavenly home". Some of you perhaps can appreciate that. We, too, have a home in heaven. However, most of us need to pay more attention to our home here on earth. So, let's think home and begin by asking ourselves what are some of the functions of a healthy home.

HOME IS WHERE WE LEARN VALUES

Home, first of all, is where we learn values. It is where we learn - or should learn - to distinguish between right and wrong. And a church home should continue with that process.

Sometime back I read in the papers about a town down in Arkansas that has tried to insure that parents are responsible for teaching their children right from wrong. The City Council of Dermott, Arkansas has passed some new ordinances regarding youths. Parents of minors can be placed in a public stockade for failing to restrain their children's illegal activities. If the parents simply cannot control their children, they can sign papers to that effect and the city will have the juvenile courts rule on what to do with those young people.

The parents will no longer be held responsible for the actions of their kids, but the parents must pay \$100 to the city or do 20 hours of community service. Furthermore, the parents must display a sign in their window and a bumper sticker on their car saying, "My children are not my responsibility. They are yours"!

An unusual approach. I don't think it would work here, but there is something Biblical in the idea. Scripture says that parents are to teach their children right and wrong and to nurture them in the way of the Lord. The idea that children just randomly turn out good or bad and that they should be free to determine their own moral course without outside influence is a relatively new (and foolish, I think) idea. No parent can control everything a child does, but every parent does have a responsibility before God for how his or her children are raised.

Actually, most children appreciate knowing where those boundaries of behavior lie. In fact, as Dr. Joyce Brothers has noted, strict need in parenting may be coming back into style. A recent study of almost 2,000 5th and 6th graders - some of whom had been reared by strict parents, others by permissive ones - produced some surprising results. The children who had been strictly disciplined possessed high self-esteem and were high achievers... socially and academically. What these children said revealed that they were actually happier than the un-disciplined children. They loved the adults who made and enforced the rules by which they lived.

Take this story of Kenny Wheeler. Wheeler grew up in east LA where gang-related deaths are not uncommon. While in High School, Wheeler looked and acted like a gang member but he didn't actually join a gang. He was fortunate enough to have a teacher who looked out for him. There was a time when Wheeler skipped school and his teacher called his home. Wheeler's parents went out and looked for their missing son, found him, and took him back home with them. Says Wheeler,

"The other guys laughed for a week...but now some of them are junkies or in jail. It was worth the week that they humiliated and teased me!"

Today Wheeler is a gang counsellor in LA. The point is that young people need to know where the boundaries are. They need to know that parents love them enough to hang tough sometimes. This is not to say that physical punishment should be used. We can be firm, but gentle. Jesus was the ideal model for such behavior. Home, first of all then, is where values are learned and it's where we learn to distinguish right from wrong. Let's move on to point two.

HOME IS WHERE WE LEARN TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

Secondly, home is where we learn trust and confidence.

I like Sam Levenson's story about the eight year old boy who was heading off to camp for the first time. In the presence of the camp owner and two counsellors, his parents were signing the various forms and documents for the boy's admission to camp. Meanwhile his younger brother was watching all of this and finally looking up with tears in his eyes asked his father,

"Daddy...why are we selling Matthew?"

I trust that Matthew knew that he wasn't being sold. If there is one great need that small children have, it is to know that they have a place in the world - yes, that they belong! This, of course, is the great tragedy of the break-up of families. Each of us needs to know there is something in our lives that is stable and secure. Home is where we learn trust and confidence.

This is why children drive us nearly crazy sometimes with their need for attention. Please notice me, they say in so many words. A father put his little girl to bed with all the necessary ritual only to be called back into her room several times. Finally, after hearing a blood-curdling scream, he rushed back to her room and demanded to know what the problem was. The child declared,

"Daddy...I burnt my tongue". "You burnt your tongue? How in the world did you do that?" shouted the exasperate father. "I licked the night light" she replied.

Now that little girl wasn't just precocious. She needed to know that she mattered. Children have this tremendous need to be aware of their own significance. And actually, that's a need we all have...adults, too. We satisfy it in ways other than licking night lights. Parents have a crucial role to play in giving children the attention and the love they need.

Mickey Mantle was deeply influenced by his father. Mantle writes,

"According to mother, I was still in the cradle when Dad asked her to make a baseball hat for me. When I was five he had her cut down his baseball trousers and sew together my first uniform. Also, when I was five, he began teaching me how to switch-hit; that is, to hit left-handed against right handed pitchers, and right-handed against left-handed pitchers, which gives a hitter a big advantage.

Dad was a left-hander, Grandpa a right-hander. Every day after work they'd start a five hour batting session. Both would toss tennis balls at me in our front yard as hard as they could. I'd bat right-handed against Dad, and switch to left-handed against Grandpa. When I hit the ball hard over the house or through somebody's window they would count it a run. I'm probably the only kid around who made his old man proud of him by breaking windows. Dad hammered baseball into me for recreation. But he did more than that. He taught me confidence."

Certainly Mickey Mantle's later success was the product not only of talent and personal initiative, but also of that trust and that confidence he learned at home from his father and grandfather. Trust and confidence are primary functions of a home. God, of course, is our ultimate source of trust and confidence and this brings me to the final thing I want to lift up.

HOME IS WHERE WE FIRST MEET GOD

Let me say how grateful I am for those young families in our church and for the single parent families who make the effort each Sunday of having their children in Sunday School. Believe me, I know it is an effort. There is solid statistical evidence that you will not be sorry. Attendance in church and in Sunday School does make a difference in a child's life, even if he or she may not understand all that goes on around here.

A small child was sitting in her mother's lap and they were looking at a magazine together. They came across a picture of Jesus and her mother asked the child if she knew who that was? "Yes" said the child rather matter-of-factly. "Yes...He goes to our church".

Children may not understand everything we talk about around here. But what they do understand and the feelings they pick up around here will make a difference in their lives. So put this down then as the third point of this sermon. Home is where we first meet God. If God and the church are a priority in the life of a home, it will make a difference in the life of a child. And remember there are three ways to teach a child responsibility. "Example" "Example" and "Example".

There's an old story that comes to mind about the English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He once found himself in conversation with a man who told him that he didn't believe in giving children any religious instruction. His theory was (and you've heard it, I'm sure) that the child's mind should not be prejudiced in any direction. Children should be permitted to choose their religious opinions completely for themselves.

Coleridge said nothing....but after a while he asked his friend if he'd care to see his English garden. The man said "yes"...he'd love to...and so Coleridge took him out into the garden where only weeds were growing. The man looked at Coleridge in surprise and said,

"Why this isn't a garden...nothing here but weeds". And Coleridge answered, "Well....you see...I didn't want to infringe upon the liberty of the garden in any way. I was just giving the garden a chance to express itself and to chose its own production."

Home is where we first meet God. You and I know, of course, that children cannot be expected to meet God in a home where faith is no real. So, be careful.

Out of our American western folklore comes the story of a Baptist preacher who took to a stray dog that his two sons had become very fond of. It seems that the dog was black as coal except for three very distinctive white hairs in his tail.

One day they saw an ad in the local paper about a lost dog that fit the description of the stray perfectly, including the three white hairs. With the help of his two young boys, the Baptist preacher carefully separated the three white hairs and pulled them out. The real owner, so the story goes, hearing that a dog fitting the description of his lost animal had wandered to the preacher's small farm, went looking for his dog. When he arrived the dog, of course, showed every sign of recognizing his former owner, so the man wanted to take him home.

Quickly, the minister spoke up, "Didn't you say, my friend, that the dog had three white hairs on his tail". The owner unable to find those identifying hairs was forced to leave. And do you know, that later on this Baptist preacher would write, "I kept the dog...BUT I lost my boys". Oh, yes...the names of the two boys - Frank and Jesse James.

CLOSING

Home is where we learn values...that we carry with us a lifetime. Home is where we learn trust and confidence. Home is where we first meet God. And wouldn't it be terrible to gain the whole world and lose your home? Poor Jermund Skogstad. At least he only lost his apartment. There was no one at home waiting for him, depending on him to find the way back home.

St. Paul once said, "Whether we are home or away...we make it our aim to please Him". That's a good verse to carry away from here this morning. Let's affirm on this Father's Day the importance of pleasing God in our homes. Let's make a new commitment that whatever else we may lose in this world, we won't lose our home - neither here nor in the world to come.

PRAYER

We thank You, O God, for the homes represented here in this congregation this hour...for the fathers and the mothers in those homes.

We thank You, too, for the fathers and mothers in those homes in which we were reared. Let us make a fresh commitment this hour to strengthen those homes of which we are a part - remembering that values are taught there, that trust and confidence are planted in young lives, and that home is where we first meet You, O God.

Remembering the home in which our Lord, Jesus, was raised, we ask this in His name.

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Let's make this commitment now - quietly...each in his or her own way.

PRAYER

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* TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES . Tom Brokaw, writing in today's New York Times has a helpful article entitled Of Fathers and Children (S-9)...he writes:

"When Mickey Mantle reflected on the failed baseball career of his son, Mickey, Jr., he said, 'If he would have had my dad for a dad, he would have made the major leagues. He was referring to the inspirational and coaching role of his father, Mutt Mantle....'"

PASTORAL PRAYER: June 16, 1991

GRACIOUS GOD...CREATOR OF US ALL...we give thanks for this time of prayer and ask that it will be a special moment for each of us... as our spirits come together with YOU and with each other.

WE COME in these quiet moments with all of our DOUBTS, all of our QUESTIONS, all of our WAVERING WILLS, our SHORTCOMINGS and FLAWS. However YOU find us, Lord, we know that YOU will not leave us the same!

If we are DRIFTING along in our faith, call us to a clearer direction.

If we are LUKEWARM in our love, kindle in us the fire of a deeper love and a stronger faith.

If we are CARELESS in our commitments, in our loyalties, stir us to a deeper dedication.

If we are NEGLIGENT in our spiritual life of prayer, point us, O God, to the practice of YOUR presence in our lives.

WE COME TOGETHER in this service of worship, bringing not just ourselves, but others in prayer.

In silence now, O God, we name and pray for a loved or a friend who is ill...

In silence now, we name and pray for some who is lonely...

In silence, just now we name and pray for one who is in leadership in government...

In silence, we name and pray for one who dislikes us...

In silence now, we name and pray for a dear friend...

LORD...we do not need to ask YOU to hear our prayers, but we do ask to be open to receive the answers that YOU give us.

And if we are to be a part of YOUR answer in loving the lonely, or visiting the sick, forgiving an offender or an offense, LORD, enable us now to hear YOUR word of direction.

And finally, O God, we pray for our world. Much of our world is hungry, cold, homeless, lost. Much of it lives with constant violence and all of us live constantly under the threat of nuclear destruction.

So wherever YOUR people gather in worship today, we ask that YOU will be present with them and then to move them in compassionate service to all Creation, to the entire family of mankind, to all of Your children.

HEAR our prayers, offered now in the name and spirit of Christ, the life-giver - our Lord, Saviour and Master.