

"REASON TO RETURN"

INTRODUCTION

It was that deep purple time of the evening when the elements cease their hot hours of struggle, when wind and sky, earth and ocean put their arms around each other in that kind of embrace that makes a person breathe deep and easy. Not far from where we were sitting on the sandy beach we could see seagulls drifting gently in the summer breeze. Off in the distance we could see a small sailboat slowly heading for home. Behind us the tall grass rustled a contented benediction on the day. The velvet air tasted so good. Looking up, we watched the evening star watching us. It had been another good day of a good vacation and the five of our family savored it together.

Then it was that our seven year old daughter broke the spell: "Daddy" she said, "When do we go back to the city?" Before I could answer her nine year old brother lying on his back, hands clasped behind his head, his eyes looking off millions of light years, dreamily asked the real question, "Not when, Catherine, but why? Why go back, Dad? Let's just stay here where it's no sweat!" I'm not sure exactly how I answered, but I suppose I said we had to go back because ~~I had to earn a living~~, because they had to go to school, because we had a home to live in back there....and the summer cottage might get a little chilly when the Maine winter rolled in. They were rather practical, pragmatic reasons which, we all knew, didn't really answer the question at all. So often our "because's" don't really deal with the childlike, persistent "Why" in us...

As it happened, that deep purple evening in Maine came at the end of a summer that saw a number of our cities blown up and torn apart in shockingly violent riots. It came at the end of a summer when the Administration in Washington was setting about to escalate an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam and raise taxes to send more of our boys out there and drop more bombs on many innocent people. It came at the end of a summer when strikes were threatening not only our economy, but also crippling the education of children in our schools. It came at the end of a summer when no less than seven major magazines carried stories on the rising incidence of drug addiction in the United States; when the Middle East remained snarled in accusations and counter-accusations, and fighting continued in the Congo. It was a deep purple evening of a summer that had been dark for so many both here at home and abroad. Yet, we were immune. For us, on the shore of that beautiful stretch of ocean, ~~beach and pure air~~, it was as my son put it, "No sweat". Indeed, "Why go back?" Back to all of the pain and agony, the turbulence and conflict, the noise and dirty air of the city. Why shouldn't a man find or carve out for himself a little corner clear of chaos and settle down, whether in a small New England town, or his own backyard, or social club, or church, or wherever he can have some peace and quiet in a world that has little of either.

IT GOES DEEPER: JACOB'S SITUATION

You see.....the "Why" really does run deeper than all of our "because's"...."Why go back?" "Why return to become involved...." The question keeps nipping at my mental heels. For it has to do with what we are made for....whzt the purpose of life is....how a man becomes what he is intended to be. While thinking about this these past couple of weeks, the Biblical story of Jacob came to my mind. Remember it. Remember how Jacob tricked his father into giving him the blessing that really belonged to his older brother, Esau, and how earlier he had conned Esau out of his birthright in exchange for a mess of pottage. You remember how Jacob then had to get out of the country fast in order to escape Esau's wrath; how after a time he ended up in another country at his uncle's home where he worked seven years for Leah, and then seven more for Rachel; and how, with a little initiative and a few short-cuts, he became a wealthy man. Then the time came when he had to go back - back home, back to the land that God had promised to him, and

FL11 1706
to go back

to his father Issac before him, and his father's father Abraham before that. Jacob felt that tug to go back, back to an angry brother Esau, back to all that trouble, turmoil and danger.

As he went back - with family and flocks with him - he came to the river Jabbok, which was all that stood between him and his brother and all that meant. When he got to the river, night was falling and he sent his company on ahead while he stayed alone on the north bank.. Perhaps it too was a deep purple evening, the earth and sky and water all in bed together, birds chirping sleepily, the sun being pinned to the green earth mat by the distant rugged hills.

Then the scene is shattered as out of the shadows a stranger leaps and hurls himself at Jacob. All night they wrestle in a deadly combat, until the sky begins to turn pink in the east and the sheep begin to bleat in the distance. The stranger, with a quick blow, cripples Jacob's hip and urges Jacob to let him go, for the day is breaking. But Jacob, with all of the desperation of a man who now knows he is losing, hangs on and grunts, "I will not let you go till you bless me". So the stranger asks, "What is your name?" and Jacob answers. Then the stranger replies, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed". So the stranger, we are told, disappears and Jacob with a new name, limps on crippled hip into the dawn of a new day.

WHY GO BACK Why go back? Why leave a place of tranquility, a season of serenity, a spot of success? Why did Jacob? Why do we? I suppose the obvious answer is that life is change, that to live means to be constantly leaving one place, one time for another, and then another and another till we come to our last place and the end of our time. We go from place to place, season to season, because that's simply the way it is. We have no choice but to go - to leave, to change.

But the question is still unanswered. Why is that the way it is? I think the answer is that there is something or someone at the heart of things that just will not let us be - that insists that we become something - something more, something different, something other than we are. There is something in the scenes of sunset or of riot that says, "No - not here"; something in the seasons of success or of distress that says, "No - not yet".

Recently I came across an article written by a professor at Yale Divinity School by the name of William Muehl. The article was entitled "To Hell With Acceptance". As one who has often talked and counselled about the grace of acceptance, I was jolted, but the article made a good point. Let me read a bit of it to you.

"Years ago we were told that God loves us. And during the period of my childhood I even learned several songs committed to that proposition. We used to sing them in Sunday School whenever we could get the teacher to stop talking about our unclean thoughts and bad ways long enough to strike a chord on the piano. But as I was saying the proclamation that one has been accepted by God is one of the worst bits of bad news ever to issue from the murky depths of Teutonic theology. Who wants to be accepted? I certainly don't! Neither I suspect does the rest of the human race who have not been infected with the vows of ordination....we want to be loved. And there is a terrible chasm between love and acceptance."

"To be loved gives a man a sense of person significance" Then Mr. Muehl comes to this point...."The problem facing us today is not

an excess of meaning in history, but the suspicion that history is wholly without meaning. We no longer find men huddled around ancient altars trying to work out the complex implications of divine commandments. We see them, on the contrary, wandering about at loose ends, persuaded that no one gives a damn about what happens anywhere in the cosmos. To tell such aimless creatures that God (doesn't care, that he just accepts) is hardly good news. But a God who loves men, specific men, actual combinations of virtues and vices, with a love which reflects and responds to those variable qualities in each one of them gives meaning to life and dignity to history.....so brothers be of good cheer. You are not accepted. You are loved".

To live is to be in a state of constant change, of going from place to place, time to time, because God will not let us alone, will not accept us or things as they are. He is abroad in life to urge us, to force us to become something. In that, we have no choice.

TO BECOME WHAT, AND TO GO WHERE

The question we then confront is this: to become what? To go where? In this we do have a choice. Perhaps I can approach it this way. Over the entrance to a boy's school in New England there is this motto in Latin (if I can come close to saying it correctly): "Huc venite, pueri, ut viri sitis". Translated it means, "Come to this place, boys, in order to become men". Now it's not a bad motto. It suggests, rightly, that there are places to which a person can go in order to become more of a man, more of a human being, that is - more of what he is intended to become than he now is. Perhaps the Christian life is just a matter of choosing those places.

I read recently that a college professor lecturing to a class in English Literature told how the English poet Keats struggled in his poem, St. Agnes Eve, to find just the right word for one particular sequence and how he rejected alternative after alternative until he discovered the right word. He spoke of how Robert Frost strained for 27 years to find just the right concluding sentence for one of his poems. And then the professor made this point which is worth remembering: "This, I think, is the final morality of poetry. You never cheapen your choices. Everything else in poetry is secondary to the morality - the insistence - on the level at which you use the principle of selection. Never cheapen your choices. Refuse to cheat."

Never cheapen your choices. That is the word not only for poetry but also for life. And God knows, most of us do cheapen our choices. We settle for money or comfort or a good job or the contentment of the back yard. We settle, that is, for the acceptable, not the excellent; for the easy way, not the demanding way. But there is something that seems to be built into life that keeps saying to us, "Choose again. Go back. Never cheapen your choices".

Perhaps this is why I remembered Jacob when this question of why go back kept going through my thoughts. Jacob didn't cheapen his choices. He chose to go back. He kept remembering the grave injustice he had committed against Esau, his brother. He chose to go back to set right something that was wrong, something he had helped to make wrong. One motive for returning was to seek reconciliation with Esau. Remember that line in Camus' "The Rebel" where the main character asks: "What good is the salvation of one if all are not saved?" In Biblical terms we are told over and over again that salvation of one is simply not possible if all are not saved. And that answer starts way back there in Genesis. Jacob could not be saved, which is to say that he could not become fully human, could not be what he was intended to be, without going back to the brother he had betrayed. So he didn't cheapen his choices by trying to find some other way, some other place to settle down and avoid that painful, dangerous encounter. He went back.

It carries a challenge for us and I put it to you in this fashion: who is the brother we need to go back to? Who is the one who has been hurt by our coldness, or our ambition, or indifference or our prejudice? A wife? A father? A son? A daughter? Or is it the man you work for or who works for you? Or is it the person of color - disillusioned and bitter and angry at people - at us - who do so little, so late, to meet their rights - life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - for decent housing, for jobs, for schools? Or is it the Indian starving on the streets of Calcutta or Bombay while millions of us fight the battle of the bulge, the problem of overweight? Or is it the mentally ill who shuffle and whiper aimlessly in the back wards of state hospitals? Or is it the youngster who will drop out of high school this year or the youngster who in grade school will be permanently deprived of basic skills because the schools are over-crowded and understaffed, and because not enough people care enough to tutor them and to fight for better schools. Or is it the young men - blue-eyed, brown-eyed, slant-eyed - who are being crippled and killed in a war that no one seems to be winning, that grows bigger, that destroys more and more life and property. Where is it taking us? When will it end? Who is the brother we need to go back to - to be reconciled with, to undo previous injustices - in order to become men in the highest and finest sense - to become truly human. Each of us must answer because there is something - some place, some one, and we dare not cheapen our choices.

IDENTITY IN STRUGGLE Let me take this one step further. (Normally - timewise I would stop here, but having been out of the pulpit for six weeks I feel I owe it to you to give you a little bit more of my first Sunday back....) Jacob, you will note, found out who he was or better - what he could become as he struggled with the stranger. ("Your name shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel - for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed....") It was in the struggle - not apart from it - that Jacob discovered his identity and also the identity of the stranger. And I think we could say this that the place where we are most likely to become human and find our own identity is not the place where success is sure and security abounds, but rather where risks are taken, rebuff and rejection possible, where we dare to fail while we persist in the the struggle.

You wonder: who was the stranger with whom Jacob wrestled. I use to assume that the Bible was suggesting it was some angelic visitor. But the passage says nothing about angels at all. It says a man wrestled with Jacob. A man! He found his identity and God's identity by wrestling with a man. And can we not claim, too, that as we wrestle with the needs of men in our time that we shall find our identity and God's identity, too. In closing I share with you this beautiful passage I came across recently from the Russian writer, Turgenev:

"Once we were all standing waiting, when a man came up from behind and stood beside me. I did not turn toward him, but I felt the man was Christ. Emotion, curiosity, awe overcame me. I made an effort and looked at my neighbor. A face like everyone's, a face like all men's faces. The eyes were looking straight ahead; the lips closed, not compressed; a small beard parted in two; the hands folded and still; and the clothes on him like everyone's and, most disappointing, mud all over his boots. 'WHAT SORT OF CHRIST IS THIS?' I thought - 'SUCH AN ORDINARY MAN. IT CANNOT BE.' I turned away; but I had hardly turned my eyes from this ordinary man when I felt with unshakeable conviction that this was Christ standing beside me. Suddenly my heart sank. For only then I realized that just such a face - like all men's faces - is the face of Christ, and just such feet - boots with real mud on them - are his"

Who is the stranger - the brother we are urged to seek out and go back to? And why go back? It's very simple, but finally saving. Only as we come to this place or to that place - wherever it is for you, and to this person or that person - whoever it is

for you - will we become men. And only by struggling will we see in the light of some incredible dawn yet to come the face of love at the heart of things, the face of Him whose love will not let us be what we are, but is always seeking us to grow, to mend, to renew, to shape as again and again we go back to the unending struggle to become truly and fully human. Finally - that is what matters. Finally - that is all that matters. And that is why we need to go back.

LET US PRAY O Spirit of the Living God, who hast filled this place in times past, fill it now again that the people who come here may be strengthened and renewed to do thy will, enabled to surpass themselves in days to come and to share generously and to show that love which belongs to Thee and is for all mankind. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen