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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Text: Luke 15: 11-24
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Turn Back!

We got as far as Cleveland, and then we turned around.

It had been a full and busy year, and we had looked forward to regrouping as a family, and to exploring some places together. It was back in mid-July, and our van was stuffed full of everything we would need for several weeks on the road. The ultimate destination was Colorado, where we intended to have some mountain adventures with friends. But something felt off for me. The previous day I had gone on a run, and returned feeling lousy. A Covid test turned up negative, and so we pressed on across Pennsylvania, which, I must tell you, qualifies as my least favorite stretch of highway in all of America. And now here we were in Cleveland, and I was still feeling bad. Another test made it clear that I had Covid.

What to do? We stood in the hotel parking lot for a long hour working through that puzzle. I didn't feel terrible, and so maybe we could just keep going. I could mask up and we could camp the whole way - wouldn't that be a part of learning to live with this virus, rather than shutting everything down? But then questions flooded in: what if Rachael, or one of the kids got sick? What then? And what if one of us really did start to feel awful? And what about the people with whom we would inevitably come into contact along the way? And what about our friends in Colorado? They said I could isolate in their Airstream. In the end, the decision was clear: we would have to turn back. We studied the map to see if there was a way around Pennsylvania, but resigned ourselves to crossing that expanse once again. By 10:30 we were back in the driveway of the parsonage, a mere 48 hours after we had left. I ascended the stairs to the third floor, and began my quarantine.

We were all disappointed, of course. Miraculously, everyone else in the family stayed healthy, and we all found ways to adjust to the new reality. The kids quickly found their friends, and Rachael found projects around the house. For my part, I had entered paradise unaware! My case was mild, and, save for a little fatigue, I soon felt almost normal. Here's what happened next. A close friend challenged me to use the quarantine well - he said I ought to crack Joyce's *Ulysses* while I was stuck upstairs alone. It was on my shelf, but I had never read it. Rachael brought it up that afternoon and I read those first fateful words of the novel early in the evening: "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed." It wound up being one of the most absorbing reading experiences - maybe - of my entire life. For the next ten days I watched no films, saw no TV, and checked the internet only sporadically. I simply read, and then tried to puzzle through what precisely I had read. One night I lay in bed and a wave of gratitude washed over me. It felt as if a power of concentration had been restored, something I hadn't felt for a long time. If you didn't know before, now you do: you've got a strange character as your minister. With the right reading material, I would make a cheerful prisoner. I can only say that I felt somehow renewed by the experience. It wasn't the summer I wished for. But it may have been the one I needed.

I know that ours is not the only family to have been turned around on a journey of late. I've heard more than a few stories in this community about trips and vacations ruined by Covid. Compared with what might have been, we got off easy. But in ways large and small, we've all

got stories of disappointed expectations and frustrated plans from these past two and a half years. We've all had some version of the parking lot experience that Rachael and I shared, weighing the options, absorbing all the disappointment, and then adjusting ourselves to a new reality - those rides across the proverbial Pennsylvanias of our lives as we go back home, deflated and defeated.

What I'd like to suggest is that this may be a constitutive part not only of what it is to live through a pandemic, but of what it is to be alive in the world. How many times have we gone down one road, having planned as best we can for the contingencies, only to be turned back? When you think about it, it happens all the time. We bank on the assurance of a relationship, only to find that it doesn't last. We have to turn around. We test out world views and new life philosophies, only to discover that they don't have the power to hold us. And so we turn around. Or we set out on a career path, only to find that after years of preparation, the way is blocked, forcing us to make other choices. We turn around. How many Clevelands are contained in each of our lives, where we've had to weigh the options, and then go back to basics? Might it be that such moments offer at least the possibility of recalibration, and some form of renewal?

Here is where our Scripture lesson for the morning is helpful. The story of the prodigal son is overfamiliar, and so it can be hard to find fresh meaning in it. Preachers and casual readers alike tend to focus on the prodigal's dissolute living - his greed, his hedonism, his waste. But if the prodigal son was narrating his own story, I wonder if he'd describe himself differently. I wonder if he'd tell us of his burning need to expand his horizons, leading him to head off into the world in search of experience. I wonder if he'd tell us of his ambition - in the best sense of that word - to do something big that his family and his friends didn't fully understand. I wonder if he'd speak about heading out upon that path with excitement and purpose, and I wonder if he'd tell us about the early rush of a few successes along the way. But I also wonder if he'd speak about how things began to go sour - the recession that set in, say, or the lost job, or the failed opportunities. I wonder if he'd tell us about his own parking lot moment, when, having weighed the options, he knew he had to return home.

I believe the prodigal's story is a universal one, with or without the details about dissolute living. It stands for all those moments across our lives when the elusive object of our desire - the person, the thing, the status, even the family trip - when that object of desire fails to materialize, or when it fails to fulfill. It's a story about what it means to weigh the options, and then to be forced to return to the place we started. Amidst the disappointment and defeat, is there, perhaps, something, or someone, that rushes to greet us, to welcome us home? Might something like grace, or of God, be contained within those moments?

A few weeks ago, Frederick Buechner, a favorite novelist and memoirist, died at the ripe old age of 96. Buechner was a Presbyterian minister who never served a church, but went rooting around in the dust and detritus of his own existence in search of those places in which something like God might be at work. In Buechner's theology - as in mine - chance, and not a sovereign Deity, governs the world. He put it this way: "I don't think God goes around changing things in the sense of making bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people, or of giving one side victory over the other in wars, or of pushing a bill through Congress to make school prayer constitutional." Rather, he said, "through the chance things that happen, God opens up possibilities of redemptive human change in the inner selves, even of people who wouldn't be caught dead believing in Him."¹

¹ As quoted in *The New York Times*, "Frederick Buechner, Novelist With a Religious Slant, Dies at 96," August 15, 2022.

Maybe we can say it like this. God didn't visit Covid upon me - or upon anyone else for that matter - to turn us around or to teach an important life lesson. But the experience that we tend to name "God" might be present within that experience. God didn't bring a pandemic into the world for some secret purpose, and God sure didn't start the war in Ukraine. But it may be that here and there and now and then, the human response to those events discloses the presence of God. God didn't help to repeal Roe and God doesn't get Presidents elected or unelected, but God might be contained within the mercy or compassion or movement for justice that such events bring forth. God is not to blame when bad things happen to us, and God probably shouldn't be credited when fortune is kind. Better to say, simply, that things happen. Life happens. Events happen. God would be the possibility that exists within the events of our lives, the potentiality stirring inside of the chance occurrences that beset us all around, leading toward greater understanding, or greater connection. God is the strange and paradoxical possibility that even amidst the worst that might befall us, some redemptive human change might occur within us or to us, like the father rushing to welcome the son back home.

I've heard people suffering from acute illnesses describe their misfortune in precisely that way - as holding out an elusive and mysterious gift that they wouldn't have chosen, but that they wouldn't trade for anything. It's a radical life detour, but somehow it led to deeper and more meaningful relationships. Call it what you will, but I choose to name that reality God. I've heard people immersed in the long term care of others - another kind of life detour - describe their task in that way as well - as containing tender mercies, unavailable in other times, for which they're grateful. Call that what you will, but I choose to call it God. I've witnessed communities - this is one of them! - that, when a crisis set in - again, another detour - found the strength to set their shoulders to the wheel, and to meet the moment with all the creativity and generosity of spirit they could muster. Call that what you will, but I choose to call it God. It's true, it doesn't always happen that way, and sometimes an event is just an event. Sometimes a disappointment is just a disappointment, and a tragedy is only a tragedy. Still, I've come to think that God is the possibility lurking somewhere inside of the events of our lives, concealed, as if waiting to be uncovered. When it happens, it's not unlike the father in the story, running to welcome the prodigal home again. "You've come back, you've noticed me once more, I've been here all along, hoping for this moment," that voice - if it is a voice - whispers to us. It comes in all sorts of ways. Where, within your own disappointments, your own life detours, your own moments of turning back and turning around, have you sensed that strange and paradoxical welcome?

I'd like to push this story in one final direction before I'm through. I think for many people, the parable of the prodigal son might also be a story about religion itself, and about our own relationship to faith. Sometimes we need to lose faith in order to find it again. Say we grow up with it. Say we come to take it for granted in our lives. But say that over time, we drift away. Or we explore some new beliefs and practices. Going away for a time can actually be a very good thing, a sign of maturity and growth. But aren't there also times in our lives when it becomes necessary to return back home, to go back to basics? Aren't there times that we need to find our way across the various Pennsylvanias of our lives in order to regroup, and to figure things out? I suspect that's what many people are going through right now, in one form or another. Given all that we've been through during Covid, and given all the many crises that continue to afflict us in our national and collective lives, perhaps now is the time to make the return journey. Even if you've been here all along, perhaps now is the time to reexamine all those old stories that we learned once upon a time, and to consider whether they might have wisdom to offer during a new and turbulent period in our lives. For some of us, there's a

comfort to be found in returning to what we've known, but for just as many, it's strange and disquieting to return to a place we've already been. It can be like meeting an -ex on the street - mostly you just want to get away, because you don't want to regress to who you were at an earlier time in your life. If you're in that category, I wish to assure you that returning to faith, or reexploring faith, or deepening your faith, doesn't have to be exactly the same, because you're not the same. Words like "God," "Jesus," "Spirit," "Church," and "Prayer," - they may speak to us in wholly different ways, and mean something utterly different than they did before we set out. Perhaps, even after all the abuse those words have suffered, there is even something stirring within the words themselves, a something or Someone that rises up to greet us as we draw close. Perhaps there's a Something or Someone that runs to welcome us as we make our way home, that rushes to find us as we pull into the metaphorical driveway, earlier than anticipated. And maybe there's something within us that crumbles in relief as we come back to that which we've needed most. Call that feeling what you will. Call that Something what you will. But I choose to call it God.

Who can say what the coming days, the coming year, will bring. Maybe all of our plans and intentions will come off without a hitch. Or maybe we'll experience something like Cleveland. If that happens to you, try to be patient. Perhaps there's something within the moment that's calling to you. Perhaps there's even a Gracious and Well Meaning Presence rushing to greet you in such moments, like a parent rushing to welcome home a long departed child.

When you need to, may you find your own way home, and may your heart rise in gladness when you do.