

*Thomas Wolfe Was no Theologian**

Scripture: Luke 15:11-24

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I confess to a certain existential interest in the subject of the sermon this morning, for this is one of those days when the sermon is for me. (I trust every sermon is for me.) But more especially today, the sermon arises out of the preacher's own personal situation and personal need to hear again the reassuring word of God. It all stems from two Sundays ago. The sermon was over, and during the singing of the last hymn, my eyes were casually scanning the Congregation rather unconsciously. Among you, in their customary places, were Janie and our two sons, David and Steven, both of whom were to leave within the next week for college. In that moment, the instant surge of awareness that both boys were leaving home, that they would not be there the next time we assembled in that place, and the accompanying fear, the dreaded fear, that Thomas Wolfe is right, "You can never go home again."

You know Thomas Wolfe's quote which has become a sentimental cliché to describe the truth about human experience, "You can't go home again." Surely that was true for Wolfe. Once he left his home in western North Carolina to wander all over the world, he never returned to the North Carolina mountains again except in his imagination. The cliché became the title of his last novel and indeed the epitaph of his life. "You can't go home again," Wolfe wrote. "You can't go back to your family—back to your childhood—back to romantic love—back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame—back home to lyricism, to singing just for singing's sake—back home to the ivory tower—back home to places in the country away from all the strife and conflict of the world—back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for—back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you—back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of time and memory." And Wolfe is right. We wish he weren't, but Wolfe is right. Second love is never the same as first love, the second child is never the same as the first child, the second birth never so pointed as the first. Or with faith, the second, longer and more profound look into the verities of the faith (though infinitely more satisfying ultimately) can never recapture the inner exhilaration of that first moment when the reality of God dawned.

And of course what is true for us privately is true for us collectively. History repeats itself to be sure, but never in identical chapters. The world will never be again tomorrow what it was yesterday, despite all of our yearnings for the good old days. We can never return to life as it was before the atomic bomb or before the pill or the airplane or the computer. Life will never be the same again. Wolfe is right...but thank God Thomas Wolfe is no theologian.

Long before Thomas Wolfe wrote about his own wonderings and wanderings, another told a tale—not nearly so elaborate nor pretentious a story, but a story that twenty centuries later still penetrates to the very heart of every human being who hears it. It is, of course, the story you heard retold for the thousandth time a few moments ago—Jesus' enduring epic of the young man who asked for his inheritance early,

quickly converted it into cash and ran away, as far as his money would take him, squandered it in the far country, his entire inheritance in what the writer called “riotous living.” Only when his money ran out and his friends ran out, and there was no place else for him to run, he “came to his senses,” so the story goes, and he said to himself, “I will arise and go to my father, and he arose and came to his father, but while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. It was Jesus’s way of saying, “You can go home again.” Thomas Wolfe said you can’t, and in one sense he is right, because Wolfe was writing out of the human experience, of the human condition, human emotions and human yearnings. That is what makes Wolfe the novelist he is — his capacity to take those common human emotions (like homesickness) and translate that into a story that any one of us can read and declare, “That is me. I know that one. I too have tried to go back and found I cannot.” But thank God Thomas Wolfe is no theologian. Wolfe is writing of men and women, their homesickness and their despair. Jesus’ story is about God, about God who waits and watches like a father with arms widespread...and always a bottle of champagne stuck away in the basement just in case the child comes home when the stores are closed.

Thomas Wolfe says, “You can’t go home again.” Jesus says, “You can come home again...anytime.” The stories, however, are not contradictory. Wolfe simply writes of what he feels, what everyone feels, the human ache for home, the place where we belong. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the theme of so many Southern stories (*Gone With the Wind*, McCullough’s *Member of the Wedding*, Willie Morris’s *North Toward Home*, Warren’s *A Place To Come To*, and of course, Alex Haley’s *Roots*), the pervading theme of these Southern writers, is home, a place, that Spot one can point to and know “I belong.”

Paul Tournier takes the title of one of his books, *A Place For You*, from an interview he had with a young patient. The problem appeared to be the young man’s inability to settle down, to focus on anything. He tested brilliantly, but he couldn’t stick with anything. Nothing held his interest, and so he had spent his first adult years just wandering. In therapy, he related how he had tried the church, but without ever finding “his place” there. He tried for a while to identify with an existentialist group of intellectuals, and that was not satisfying. At one point he turned to militant communism, at another to a street gang. Everywhere he turned, the experience was the same...always the feeling he did not belong. On rare occasions, he told the therapist, in some small smoky bar, he had felt himself “in.” But the feeling was only a fleeting impression. Then in a sort of self-diagnosis, he said, “Basically I think I am always looking for a place... for some place to be.” It is the ultimate ache, isn’t it? — the need to belong and the fear that we don’t, or if we ever did, the dreaded fear that we can never regain the feeling again.

Robert Penn Warren appropriates this personal fear into sociological prophecy in his novel about Jed Tewksbury, a contemporary uprooted and alienated prodigal who wanders from job to job, from wife to wife, from broken dream to broken dream. At one point Jed has a conversation with his friend, Stephen, in which Jed speaks nostalgically of his home town in Alabama: “I told him how, hating the South, I had fled it, and ever afterwards blamed my solitude on that fact. I had fled, but had found nowhere to flee to.” Stephen listened intently, then in turn said, “As for me, I have no country that I recognize as my own, and I am trying to learn to be happy in that condition.” Then

he began to speak of the countryless world to come. "We are merely feeling the first pangs of modernity — the death of the self which has become placeless. We are to become enormously efficient and emotionless mechanisms that will know how to breed even more efficient and emotionless mechanisms," he predicts. We hope the prophecy is wrong, even though the evidence leaves us unconvinced. At least Warren has identified for us the problem, the human need for a place (an emotional place where one feels at home, where regardless of one's geography or one's history, one feels secure and comfortable and at home.)

So it is crucial that periodically we preach on the prodigal son. Like the Easter story and the Christmas story, it bears repeating, for the story of the prodigal is the gospel in capsule. It is all there: our rebellion and God's grace, our rebellion and God's welcome. Is anyone so dense as not to identify with the story? You do know, don't you, that the story was never told only for the debauchers, drunkards, and whoremongers. The story is, for any who has ever wandered even a few feet from home and wondered about the kind of welcome that would await should they ever try to go home again. The story is for anyone who has ever wasted his substance (time, energy, intellect, money) in pursuit of private profit and is now having second thoughts about such waste. The story is for anyone, any institution, church, or nation which has set its course in one direction and wants now to change but wonders if that is possible. The story is for anyone who has ever breathed the air of the far country (which is only another name for that place where one feels separation from God). To be sure, the far country may be a land of riotous living and drunken debauchery, but it may also be the land of emotional apathy, the land of intellectual atrophy (a mind once open and curious which is now drawn closed). It may also be the land of supreme comfort and luxury where our successes so isolate us from the world that God (who is always found with the dispossessed) is rarely seen. The far country may be a place of genuine doubt ...or on the other hand, the far country may even appear to be a very religious place, all the appearance of piety and personal orthodoxy, but oblivious to the weightier matters of the law ... justice, mercy, and faith. The far country is any place (any moment) where the experience is separation from God.

Well, we are all wanderers, are we not? I dare say there is not one of us here (even the more saintly among us) who has not tasted the fruit of the far country, for to be human is to know separation. Paul Tillich says, "Existence is separation." In fact, Tillich says separation is a better word than sin to describe our condition, and he is probably right. For to admit we are sinners doesn't really carry much of an emotional load, now does it? Most of us can own up to that rather easily, if not glibly, but to confess we are separated from ourselves ("The good that I would, I do not; the evil I would not, that I do.") or separated from one another (Friends who used to mean much to one another now hardly speak any more.) or separation from God. ("I don't go to church much any more...I find it difficult to pray any more...I really don't know what I believe any more.) Separation is a more descriptive word. Tillich is profoundly right when he says, "Before sin is an act, it is an estate," a condition. It is that ache inside which is but a symptom of our separation, our estrangement from something to which we know we belong.

In Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, one of the characters confesses to this universal condition when he says, "We all live East of Eden." (We have all been expelled from the garden, destined to an eternal homesickness.) And so it is for our sakes Jesus tells

the story, not to tell us anything we do not already know about ourselves, that we are sinners, separated and homesick. We know that.

No, the story is to tell us something about God. It is the confirmation that we can go home again. That no far country is too far, no wanderer unwelcome. Theologically, it is the story of God's grace, for remember, in the story the father owed the lad nothing more. The inheritance had been paid, the books closed, justice done. The boy had no more claim. That is just the power of the story, because the prodigal had absolutely nothing coming to him. He deserved nothing, was due nothing, expected nothing. And just at that moment, the lights went on, the music began to play, and the father shouted, "Welcome home." But of course that is the character of God's grace. It always comes when one least deserves it and least expects it. Listen to the way Paul Tillich writes of this unpredictable quality of grace:

It does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves...just as it shall not happen so long as we think in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and reluctance. It strikes us when we walk through the valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual because we have violated another life—a life which we loved—or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear—when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades—when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted." You are accepted—accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now, perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now, perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything and do not perform anything and do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace.

Well, I want to close now with a very old and well-worn preacher story. I suppose it has been told in every pulpit across the land for the past fifty years, but I tell it again not because it says anything new, but because it says something very old and very necessary. The version I remember has it that a Methodist minister was on the way to attend a conference. He was on the train, riding in the coach with only a few other passengers on board. But there was a boy who looked to be in his late teens who attracted the attention of the few passengers. The boy was fidgety and restless. He would sit in one seat for a while, then move down the car to another. The minister watched the boy for a long while and then moved over to the seat beside him saying, "What's troubling you, Son? Worried about something? Maybe I can help. I'm a minister...and if you feel like telling me, I'll be glad to listen." The boy seemed glad. "Sure," he said. "I don't mind telling you. Do you know the little town named Springvale?" (The minister said he had heard of it.) "Well, it's the next stop," said the boy. "We'll be there in about fifteen minutes. That's my home; I used to live there. My

father and mother still live there, just a mile on this side of town. Three years ago, I had a quarrel with my father. I said, "You'll never see me again." I ran away from home. Three years I've been gone. Sometimes I wrote my mother, but of course she could not write me back. I wrote her last week and told her I would be on this train passing through. I told her I would like to come home just once. I asked her if it would be all right for me to stop, to hang something white outside the house so that I would know it was all right with Dad. I knew she would do it, but I had to know how Dad felt." The boy looked out the window. Then he said to the minister, "Look, Sir. My house is just around the bend on the other side of the hill. Will you look for me? See if there's something white. I can't look if there isn't something white. Will you look for me?"

The train lurched a bit as it made the slow curve, but the minister kept his eye on the round of the hill. Then forgetting all of his clerical dignity, he shouted out, "Look, Son, look!" There stood a little farmhouse under the trees, but you could hardly see the house for white. It seems that the father and mother had taken every bed sheet, bedspread, table cloth, pillow case, even handkerchief, and hung them out on the clothesline, the fence, and the trees. The entire hillside was white. The story has it that the boy looked and was so excited that he was off the train almost before it stopped at the station. And the last the minister saw, he was running as fast as he could up the hill toward the house with the white sheets flapping in the wind. Now I tell that story because it is true. Oh, I question that it ever happened. Nonetheless, it is true (like the story of the Prodigal Son is true). It is a story about ourselves. We are all prodigals in our own way. But that is not why the story is so important. We know that. Thomas Wolfe is right, of course. No, the story is important because of what it says about God, who always waits with arms widespread with a welcome on his lips. And if we know that too, well, it bears repeating. But praise God, Thomas Wolfe was no theologian. We can come home again.