

Sermon: "What is the church?"

Lent 4, March 26th, 2017

(Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32 ; Acts 11: 1-18)

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen .

1. Scan:

2. Two Engaging Questions:

a. H.M.Y. have ever moved? (Put your hand up please.) **THANK YOU**

b. Do you remember the work involved? All that packing and unpacking ... and the things you did to make your new house, apartment a home. (Put your hand up please.) **THANK YOU**

3. Give name/ Name of Presentation: I am Allan Warren

4. Acknowledgement:**TY**... for coming to nurture your relationship to God and one another

5. W.Y.W.L & K.B.

- Today you will learn a little bit about 'exile' and 'homecoming' in the bible and how the image of 'homecoming' is a good image to keep in mind when you try and answer the question 'What is the church?'

6. Earn the respect to teach

i. "Can I tell you a bit (story) about myself today?" **THANK YOU**

- Today I want to share with you some images of 'home coming' ... Off at university I remember coming home and getting big hugs from mom. I also remember all the baking she did for when I came home. ... pie, squares, favourite cookies ... so much so my dad said 'you have to come home more often.' ... You see he had to watch his cholesterol so mom did bake much anymore.

- I remember camping with my parents down at Turkey Point when Alex was very young. It was cool to see my dad play with Alex barely walking because I don't remember him playing with me at all when I was young. You see I was the

youngest so go play with Gary or Karen. . . . I also remember all the fun Alex had playing in the camper that went on the back of my dad's truck. ... It was just his size and he treated it like a playhouse or tree fort. He use to climb up on the bed that went across the back and he was in 7th heaven.

- Then I remember coming home when my dad was in the hospital. ... My dad actually asked to go to the hospital so if dad asked to go you knew it was bad. Heart problems and he died before he could get the angiogram two days later.

7. State Change:

- Describe a "coming home" that you remember and why? Please try and find someone different to talk to and remember to introduce yourself first to help us all remember one another's names. God calls you by name and it is important to call others by name too. ... (It validates you are a unique, beloved child of God.) ... Go. Please stop. ... **TY** ...

8. Message/ Info: (remember "suggestology")

Today I want to start by talking about 'exile'. ... It is an important theme in the bible that doesn't get recognized very often. Can anyone tell us what 'exile' is? ... **TY** ... (the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons.)

Now in the bible, there is often a second part to the 'exile' and that is returning back home again or 'home coming.' What is the second part? ... **TY** ... (Homecoming.)

In the Old Testament the predominant theme of 'exile' is when the Babylonian's came and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BC and the Israelites were carried away to live around modern day Bagdad without any hope of returning home. ... Just think of how far it is from Jerusalem to Bagdad and having to walk it on bear feet. Exile is where some of the most comforting words in the Bible can be found from Isaiah ch. 40 onward. ... The section starts with "Comfort, O Comfort my people". Do you know who used those words to start a very famous musical composition? (Handel's "Messiah"). ... **TY** ...

Did you know, that the present form of much of the Old Testament comes out of the exile as well? ... What do you need to remember who you are, in a strange land with foreign customs and gods? ... **TY** ... You need to remember the stories that formed you. ... You need to remember you history. ... And so the person who has been coined 'the Priestly writer' weaved together the various sacred writings from the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, to form the first 5 books of the bible ... Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy ... that is also known as the Torah.

Did you recognize the "exile"/ "homecoming" theme in the story of the "Lost Sons"? Where did the younger son go? ... **TY** ... (far away country). ... What happened? ... **TY** ... (squandered his money, went bankrupt). ... Then what happened? ... **TY** ... (goes home). ... What does the father do? ... **TY** ... (throws a party, gives him a big hug). ... Did you ever really mess up and your parents had to come and get you? And the first thing your parent did when they picked you up was give you a big hug, rather than the lecture you were expecting? Relief that you were safe. ... We'll save the lecture for later. (exile and _____ [home coming]) ... **TY** ...

In many ways the story of the cross and resurrection can be seen in this light. ... The cross. ... My God my God why have you abandoned me? Have you ever felt like that in the midst of a personal crisis? (exile: abandoned by God) Resurrection. Discovering that God had not abandoned you in the darkness, ... in that hospital room court room ... principal's office ... but was beside you holding your hand. (coming home)

The church, in many ways, is the 'embodiment' of homecoming. ... It is the grace, the big hug, the welcome home in the midst of tears. ... No words are necessary. ... I'm glad your back. Through the symbols, communion, the fellowship, the music, the sermons, the bible studies, the service to others, the small groups, ... you recognize and come to accept the love and grace of God in your life. The 'wave of acceptance' that squashes the still small voice in your head that says you're a nobody. ... All you are every good for is messing up and you did it again. Anybody here have a strong negative voice in your head? ... **TY** ... (put my hand

up) ... One that needs to be constantly challenged by the words Jesus heard at his baptism ... "You are my own dear child, or my beloved, in whom I am well pleased" ... Words that both you and I can claim and repeat in perpetuity. ... Every day, in front of the mirror, when you wake up.

The church community, at its best, through worship and service is that voice, that that acceptance. It is the grace, that helps to heal and transform you. ... Have you ever known such grace through the church or the community of faith that bears Jesus name? ... **TY** ... I know I have. It is kind of like the really amazing curling shot or golf stroke that keeps you coming back for more. ...

But there is a catch here. Have you ever noticed that in life, "There's always a - _____ (catch)"... **TY** ... While God's love will hold you and never let you go, there is only one problem though, **God's love will never let you stay the same either.** Have you ever noticed that? ... God's love will constantly prod you, nudge you, push you to grow into a more loving, compassionate, accountable, forgiving, justice seeking individual.

So our understanding of church, can't just be a place where I learn that I am totally loved and accepted by God, which is true, but we also must learn about the 2nd half of the story. That God then nudges us to help others understand they are totally loved and accepted by God as well. ... Nudges us to be the father/mother that welcomes the other back home.

How many son's are there in "the Prodigal Son" story? ... **TY** ... Does the story end with the celebration of the younger son's return? (No) ... **TY** ... What does the father do when the older son doesn't join the party? ... **TY** ...

Did you notice how the story is left 'open ended'? We don't know if the older son remains lost in his bitterness or is able to join in the feast of God's overwhelming grace. Have you ever know anyone who was lost in 'bitterness' or resentment? ... Couldn't get past the fact that 'life isn't fair?... Not nice is it? ... One of the purposes of the church is to help us remember God's love, God's grace, God's goodness when you are touched by the random 'chaos' of the world. ... And we are all touched by that chaos in some way.

Would you like to know the two new things I learned about this well known story this week? Why did the father throw the party? ... **TY** ... (glad son returned safe and sound Absolutely). Would you like to learn a 2nd reason for the party? To restore the relationship between the younger son and the neighbours?

Do you think there was a 'buzz' in the community when the younger son left? ... Do you think there was a 'buzz' in the community when he returned? (Absolutely) You see, the younger son's leaving sent ripples through the whole community. You don't think other father's had a hard time keeping their son's on the farm? ... Well old Abe down the road let Jacob go. Come on dad, loosen up. ... They younger son broke with 'tradition'. ... You are suppose to stay on the family farm, the family business. So part of this party, was to help 'ease' the younger son, back into the community. How do we as a church, help to 'ease' people back into community so they might come to know of the goodness of God?

That was the first thing I learned. ... The second was, this ch. in Luke contains 3 stories. ... The story of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost _____ (son). ... **TY** ... Did you notice the reason for the stories at the beginning of the ch? What were the Scribes and Pharisees doing? ... **TY** ... (Complaining.) They were giving Jesus a hard time about 'welcoming outcasts and even _____ (eating with them). ... Table fellowship. Maybe the elder son represents the scribes and the Pharisees and the invitation God has given them to also 'seek out and WELCOME' the lost. ... The questions is, will they do it? ...

Do you think Jesus was in the synagogue when he was talking with the tax collectors and other outcasts at the beginning of this chapter? ... **TY** ... (I don't think so either ... he was out there in the world).

So the church is a place that:

1) reminds you that you are love unconditionally by God. ... A place that helps to heal you from the bumps and bruises of the world and it does that in many ways.

.... Can you name a few? (worship, fellowship, eating together, service, learning about prayer, small group ministries) ... It is about 'coming home' ...

2) is a place that challenges you to go out and extend that love and grace to others. ... You can do that through service to others, but you also need to do it through conversations at the water cooler at work or beside the elevator in the condo tower, or the stranger in the mall. It is about gaining skills in the 'ministry of conversation' as George Hunger calls it. And then, when appropriate, be willing to throw idea of God into that conversation.

That's what the 'talk with your neighbour' part of the church service is about. ... It is the ground work. ... The training. To practice an important 'ministry of conversation' and then be open to the 'nudging of the spirit' to drop a hint about God, or the what is going on at the church this weekend, or an outreach project of the church, into the conversation.

Did you notice that is what the passage from Acts is about? ... Peter being open to the nudging of the Spirit to, to break out of his comfort zone. "God forbid, I have never eaten anything ritually unclean in my life." and then go and talk to some 'non church folks' about who Jesus is or what is happening at the church, or your understanding of God amidst the tragedies in the universe. Have you ever heard this statement "I can't believe in a God who would allow ____ to happen in the world. We need an answer for that question. ... Did you know that this story about Peter and Cornelius is the longest story in Acts? It begins starts in ch. 10 and is repeated again here in ch. 11. Why do you tell your children something 2 or 3 or 4 times? (So they remember to do it.) ... **TY** ...

So the same challenge that faced the early church, faces us today. Extending this 'homecoming' to everyone. ... Maybe another lesson is, that whenever you invited new people to the party, or make changes to be more welcoming of new comers ... there will always be grumbling.The scribes, the Pharisees, the elder brother. ... Welcome to the church, with all it's joys and it's 'humanness'. Grace and reconciliation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Hymn #147 MV "God help us to treasure"