

This is a sermon with three scenes. Foot washing and name tags. Going Home. Trinity.

Scene one: Foot washing and name tags

Foot washing is found in the hospitality customs of many ancient civilizations, especially where sandals were the chief footwear. A host would provide water for guests to wash their feet, provide a servant to wash the feet of the guests or even serve the guests by washing their feet.

When God visited Abraham and Sarah as the three strangers, Abraham said “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. (Genesis 18: 4). The woman in sin washed Jesus feet with her tears (Luke 7:44-46); and Jesus washings the feet of the apostles the evening before he is killed.

Do you know how did the tradition of foot washing come about?

It was in Genesis when the Lord God called Abraham and Sarah to come before him. He explained that there was a need to show hospitality to the stranger and visitor. They said, “Yes, Lord God, we know that must be done.” The Lord God then decide to ask them if they would prefer to wash the feet of the stranger or to put on a nametag. Sarah, of course, laughed. And then asked, “What’s behind the third curtain.”

We have a home. We have a place to go.

Jo played the tune of Goin Home. Can hear at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hflXQEZtoCk&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk9xgeI4RCU>

There’s a spiritual “Goin Home” that’s frequently played at the funerals of our military. It was played at the funerals of FDR and Gerry Ford.

*It's not far, just close by,
through an open door
Work all done, care laid by
Going to fear no more
Mother's there, expecting me
Father's waiting too
Lots of folks gathered there
All the friends I knew
Goin' home
Goin' home*

You hear the weaving together of images—home with family and friends linked with the home of heaven.

Millions of people throughout the world and thousands here in Seattle are seeking a home. I know that for some people “home” is a terrifying image rising out of a terrifying experience. But even that truth points is grounded in a disappointment about what should have been, what could have been. The sense of going home is for most of us connected with our longing for a place to be, where we are known and deeply loved. And knowing that there is a home to go to allows us to live and die in hope.

In Isaiah the foreigners and outcasts are welcome in. In Romans the disobedient receive mercy and compassion and continue to belong.

The phrase used by my parents with my brother and me is, “you can always come home.” Did your parent say something like that?

Going home is certainly a matter of security. However it's more than that and runs deeper than that. It even goes deeper than the sense of being a place that's familiar with routines and habits that are comfortable and familiar.

Over the years I've had people come to me, people who were totally new to the church. They would talk of having come home. It was coming home to a place they had never known and have never been before. There was something about the routines of liturgy and community in these parishes that struck a chord.

It was my experience in Wales years ago. The hills, the mountains, the towns--they all seemed strangely familiar. I had never been there before and there I was with a sense of being home.

These things are not about something like reincarnation. But it is a faith that assumes that our true home is heaven. That assumes you and I are wired for heaven. And that all through our lives we have experiences that are a taste of Heaven.

The third scene -- Trinity

There are two practical reasons for us to pay attention to a spirituality of hospitality

1. This parish is part of “home” for us. It exists so we might grow up. The practices and stance of hospitality are part of being fully human, part of growing up. This parish exists to form people in Christ. The parish exists so we might know a home and so this might be a home for the stranger. We know that for some people who visit us they come to know this as “home.” In many ways it was for me. And we have also come to learn by interviewing some visitors that too many of those who visit don't find us all that welcoming.
2. This parish has declined almost 20% in its average Sunday attendance in the past 13 years. If that trend continues we will be in serious trouble.

Addressing both concerns—being a home for ourselves as well as the stranger; and surviving—calls for the spiritual practices of hospitality.

It's easy to ignore these things: Those who visit and don't feel welcome have the grace at least to not come back and tell. They're not here so we don't really experience what they

experience. The existing size of the congregation feels fine, large enough on most Sundays. The decline in numbers has taken place over a long period of time. And finally, we have been protected from the consequences because we have such a large endowment.

We do need to find a way.

Here's something I do know—I don't want to wash the feet of visitors at coffee hour.

On the other hand I really don't think it's appropriate for follow our Lords example in today's Gospel reading and speak of them as dogs. ("But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'")

My small first step has been to come to coffee hour, put on a name tag, and at least occasionally talk with a new person.

Remember what I said about the message my parents gave my brother and me – “you can always come home.”

I know my parents were serious in saying it. I know they would have welcomed me, I know they would've cared for me.

I also know that they were happy that they never had to do it. Happy I think both because it meant I was taking care of myself but also because I didn't come and interfere with life as they knew it.

The visitor the stranger always messes with our life. We ended up having to do things that we otherwise would not do.

This is about the dual purpose of a home. On the one hand to nurture, care for and love one another; and on the other hand to welcome to stranger. To become for the new person a home, a taste of heaven.

I dislike nametags. I am an introvert. If someone wants to know who I am they should have made friends with me in the third grade. I'm with the writer Lauren Winner on this; she said “As a introvert myself ... I find certain aspects of church life, like speaking to other human beings every Sunday, really taxing.”

But when I look at the possibilities in a spirituality of hospitality I see three things: a stance, rituals and habits, and occasional spontaneity. Isaiah and Paul took a stance that the foreigners, outcasts, and disobedient are welcome, receive mercy and compassion and belong. Foot washing, wine and coffee, and nametags are habits and rituals.

I don't believe there's a person here that doesn't want to show kindness and hospitality those who visit and explore connection with our community.

It's just about finding a way.

I'm sure we will figure something out. Our Shaping the Parish team of Fr. Kevin, Sr. Joe, Paul Hannah and Fr. Paul are working on this. I know that many of us have been reflecting on it and seeking a way that works for us.

Alan Jones, the former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and his wife were attending an evening mass for the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin, on August 14 in a farm field in Tuscany. In the congregation there were pigs, and chickens along with the devout, the casual, and the unbelievers.

He saw a connection between the experience of “home” and St. Mary. “People knew they had a woman in heaven on their side and that she was forever pointing to her son ... Because of her, we are well-connected. We have a home. We have a place to go. And we can live in hope because we are deeply loved. ... because of this, people live and die in hope.”ⁱ He saw all this as a taste of heaven.

ⁱ Alan Jones, *Common Prayer on Common Ground: A Vision of Anglican Orthodoxy*, Morehouse Publishing, 2006, p. 107.