

You Say Goodbye and I Say Hello
The Waters of Homecoming
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Luke 15:11-32 – A Welcome Home

A Sermon in Four Parts

Part One – A Fairy Tale

One of the elements of homecoming, which I am going to get back to later, is having grandchildren. One of the wonderful elements of having grandchildren is getting to watch children's movies again. And one of my favorite movies of the year has been "Tangled", Disney's reworking of the classic fairy tale Rapunzel.

Fairy tales work when they open hidden doors in our souls that lead to primeval forests, mystical underground streams, heavenly towers, stars to wish on, magic shoes, and healing potions which our hearts recognize as somehow true and real. "Tangled" does all of that. I believe that "Tangled" stirs up our sense that our true home is somewhere else. I don't know about you, but there were times in my childhood when I wondered how I wound up in the family I was living in. Was I switched at birth in the hospital?

The movie "Tangled" begins with the queen near death at childbirth. The knights of the realm find a magic flower, sprung from the power of a single drop of sunlight that has fallen to the ground, a flower which has the power to heal the sick and injured. An old woman Gothia had been hoarding this flower and using its power to stay forever young. The magic of this flower saves the queen's life, and its power then lives on in the magic golden hair of the new baby, Rapunzel. The evil Gothia, incensed that the flower's power has been taken from her, kidnaps Rapunzel, takes her to a tower deep in the forest, raises her there, and uses the magic of Rapunzel's hair to keep herself young. Gothia tells Rapunzel that she is her mother and prohibits Rapunzel from ever leaving the tower to see the world. Gothia sings a great song, "Mother knows best, listen to your mother/ one way or another something will go wrong I swear/ poison ivy, thugs, quicksand, cannibals and snakes, the plague... Skip the drama/ stay with mama. Mother knows best."

Now while there seems to be some mother stereotyping going on here, lest anyone be offended, realize that Gothia is not Rapunzel's mother. She is not a stepmother. She is not an adoptive mother. She is a kidnapper, so she gets to be presented as evil.

Every year on her birthday, Rapunzel sees a display of lights in the sky, for which there is no astronomical explanation. In reality, the king, queen and the entire village let thousands of floating lanterns fly into the sky on the

princess's birthday in hopes of some day finding her, or perhaps that she would find her way home.

On her eighteenth birthday Rapunzel pleads to leave home to see the lights herself, but Gotha refuses. Then, while Gotha is away gathering paints for Rapunzel, Flynn Rider, something of a romantic rogue, another favorite archetype of fairy tales, wanders into Rapunzel's tower. Rapunzel knocks him out with a frying pan, hides the crown he has stolen, and promises to return it to him if he will take her to see the lights.

What follows is one of those great journeys through the forest with all of its magic and threats. In fairy tales, the forest is often a place of safety and recovery for women seeking their freedom. While Flynn Rider assists Rapunzel in her journey, she is no stumbling, helpless, pretty face. She is resourceful, wise, and strong. And can she ever wield a frying pan!

I believe that one underlying theme of "Tangled" is that we have to leave home to find home. We have to travel through our own wilderness, often with a guide or companion, but always finding our own true vision and direction on the way.

Through the lanterns in the night sky, Rapunzel finds her way to her home, to her true parents and to her true self. There is of course a grand celebration. Rapunzel and Flynn Rider sing the song that Mary Anna and Amanda shared,

"All those years watching from the windows
All those years, outside looking in
All that time never even knowing, just how blind I've been.
Now I'm here, blinking in the starlight,
Now I'm here, suddenly I see.
Standing here. It's also clear. I'm where I'm meant to be."

The townspeople cry with joy that the princess has returned. The Queen and King cry. I cried when Rapunzel found her home. I'm a sucker for stories like this. The waters of homecoming surround the castle and flowed from my eyes and heart.

Part Two – Our children's journey from home

When our oldest son, Matt, was about 17, I wrote the following words in my journal.

"Time, right now is like a looming kidnapper
Who has sent me a note saying that in a year
He will take my son, whom I love today no less than the day he was born
And from that day on, I will see him less... and less... and less."

Around the same time, unbeknownst to me, Sandy was writing in her journal. (She told me this. I didn't break in to her journal!) "Everything about parenting now seems to be, leaving, goodbyes, about letting go. When will there be a time of turning around to say hello?"

When Sandy and I got married and took off on our own, all four of our parents were devastated. Their lives, it seemed revolved around ours.

Sandy and I vowed that would never happen to us. No matter how much

we loved our children, we promised we would keep our relationship with each other primary.

I preached often about how each of us needs to differentiate from our family of origin. I loved to quote Gibran's The Prophet – “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself... For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday...” I said good stuff about letting go and moving on when it served my own journey. But when it time for me to let my own children go, oh not so much.

I would say that two of the hardest days of our parenting lives were first, driving away from Matt as he stood alone in front of his dorm his first day at Catawba College in North Carolina. We were proud of him. We were excited about his vision. But that sight of him alone and disappearing behind us in the rear view mirror was like a punch in the stomach. We managed to hold back our tears for about a block, when we had to let go lest we rupture the muscles of sob retention in our throats. In about a mile we had to stop for ice cream.

Second in chronological order but worse in difficulty was the morning at 5:00 a.m. when we watched our second son Chris climb onto a bus in Jacksonville along with forty other complete strangers, which took him to basic training at the Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas. He was floundering, and I guess so were we. We didn't even have a good vision to celebrate.

We had always known our sons would leave home. But when the time came, it was just plain hard.

Part Three – The Bible's Water of Homecoming

I'd like you to think of the story that we know of as the Prodigal Son (and as Sandy presented it, the prodigal daughter) for this moment as a biblical archetype for the both the necessity and difficulty of leaving home and coming home.

The story's aha to me this morning is its reminder that leaving home to find home is full of pain for both the one who leaves and for those who stay behind. There is typically a dark night of the soul, like that of the prodigal, in our journeys of self discovery, for both the child who leaves and the parent who stays.

Young people, like the prodigal may succumb to wasting their life in riotous living. At the same time, parents are never blameless. Lori Gottlieb in an excellent article “How To Land Your Kid in Therapy” from the *Atlantic* says that we as parents inevitably screw up our kids. We don't mean to but we do. We can't help it. We're human.

This journey to the true self can be a pretty dark time for everybody, but there's really no way around it. The night is as important to growth as the light.

When it's time for that homecoming that is celebrated so beautifully in the parable of the prodigal, much is required of all of us. I don't think healings ever happen as quickly as they are presented in the parable. But such healings indeed happen. They just happen over time.

I think Jesus is showing us in this story again, that we do have to leave home to come home, that in this journey terrible things sometimes happen,

and that in that return home there is a divine welcome beyond our deepest fears and greater than our highest hopes.

I also believe that the older brother or sister's grumpiness over this younger child's extreme welcome is another archetype for the part of us that having been responsible, faithful, and honest can get a little out of sorts with the fuss over the wayward one returning. Every responsible parent, child, spouse, and steadfast friend has a grumpy and resentful side. It is important to know that God, like a patient parent, gives us a hug too, reminding us that our steadfastness is never taken for granted. There've been lots of parties for us and there will be more to come. This moment is for one who was dead and now alive, lost and now found.

Part Four – Back to Real Life

Remember the lines I told you that Sandy and I each wrote in our journals when our children were leaving us, about how that time seemed nothing but a journey farther and farther away? So what about those of us on the older side of goodbye? What about those of us who are who are waving from home as another generation goes of in search of their dreams?

As our children grew into adults and went through their journeys of personal discovery, Sandy and I had our own new journey. As much as we had tried to hang on to our own identities, we had to rediscover who we were without children. What TV shows do we actually want to watch? What do we like to eat? What kind of music do we want to listen to?

Then something different happened. Our kids grew up; they married. They had their own homes and children. Suddenly they turned toward us in their journeys, and we learned how to turn toward them in a new way, discovering how to be with them not as children, but as adults. Their children, our grandchildren, turned us all toward yet another home. We have found the waters of homecoming as we have found each other again. It's not all going away anymore.

All homecomings are sacraments, the outward and visible signs of the inward and invisible grace of God. As John Philip Newell says, they happen not just once in a life time, "not as separate streams, but as countless currents in a single flow, the flow of this day's dawning, the flow of this day's delight, the flow of this days sorrows, your flow oh God..." (Praying with the Earth, John Philipp Newell, p.26). They happen over and over again in the leaving and returning of those near and dear to us, and in our own seeking and finding our true home.

So remember three things. First, we have to leave home to find home. Second, in the leaving are hard and difficult times. They are necessary, and they can be healed. And third, remember the immortal words of Paul McCartney, "You say goodbye, and I say hello." In the cycles of life it is not all goodbyes. By the wonderful grace of God, there is always the return, the waters of homecoming, the hello again.

Prayer –

Imagine in your prayer that I was walking right up and down each row, sprinkling water on each of you, getting you actually wet with our waters of

homecoming. Imagine this water, gathered by these church members from every place in the world that reminded them of home splashing over you, baptizing you, and that as it touched you, you were touched by God, welcoming you in this moment to your true home.

Pray for this moment of grace, a sense of your true home, the home of your birth, the home of your life, the home of your loved ones returning to you, your home in eternity. You may rest in this moment.

And before you leave this place of grace, pray for a true home for all those left out of such homes, and live to help them find their way.

Amen.