

My Favorite Day!

Text: Genesis 3: 8-13; Luke 15: 11-24

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On the threshold of a brand new season together . . . imagine a visit to the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh. As we do, we find Piglet and Pooh on a morning stroll. Along the way, Pooh asked, "What day is it?" Piglet squeaked, "Why, it's today!" To which Pooh affirmed, "Ah, my favorite day!"¹

Well . . . today is my favorite day, too! So, welcome to this morning! Truly, and this I believe to the marrow, every day deserves exactly such expectant favor. A legacy that my father left with me is a profound awareness that every day is a gift to be embraced and not ever taken for granted. That doesn't mean that every day is easy or fun. Surely not all mornings feel equal! But it underscores the essential truth that we are only given the day, this day, and just one day at a time.

But, today is my favorite day for a more particular reason, too. It's also September (my favorite month) and a new season together and Homecoming Sunday ó a Sabbath celebration of reconnecting again from the rich variety of summer dispersions and diversions we have enjoyed. My favorite day! I've been so looking forward to it! We're back in the Meeting House, which I have missed, and the choir is with us! I've missed them, too; church school makes a new start with budding and nascent energy; Dawne and Nanette jump into their new positions with us; our Hartford Seminary International Peacemaking Student is here with us from India; a picnic awaits; and the year ahead is already over-flowing with opportunity!

So let's hold all of this close to heart . . . our re-gathering energy on this favorite day; and let's ponder two thoughts about coming home again ó especially to this place, First Church, our spiritual home. One is in the form of a question and the other is an affirmation. They both find their beginnings in this story.

Henri Nouwen, a name that many of you know, was one of the spiritual giants of our time. He was revered around the world and taught at the likes of Harvard, Yale and Notre Dame. He was of such high regard that he could have literally gone to the most prestigious universities on the planet and would have been welcomed eagerly to every faculty. But, Henri increasingly felt that the academic world was getting in the way of his spiritual well-being: too much head, not enough heart; too many politics, not enough presence; too much haughty, not enough humble; too much spin, not enough spirit. And so to the dismay and surprise of the academic world, he up and left the ivory tower to become a pastor to those whose intellectual capacities were very different from his and much closer to the ground.

He became chaplain at Daybreak,² a L'Arche community in Toronto founded by Jean Vanier for persons with significant mental impairments and challenges. They became his parish and he was their pastor and teacher - though as Henri later reported, they were the real teachers.

Every morning when he would go down for breakfast, a certain resident by the name of Adam would be waiting for him with a question ó or actually two questions, asked as one. It was the same every day and Henri received it just so. Adam would ask, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” Aware of Adam’s limitations and knowing that his asking was in complete sincerity, Henri would proceed to answer from the ground of that day, explaining who he was and why he was there. Then, moments later, as if on perfect cue, another resident named Leslie would greet him with the warmest of hearts, “Welcome, Henri!” And so, each day he would receive a question and an affirmation: “Who are you and what are you doing here?” and “Welcome, Henri!”

Henri would later write, “I could regard these people as mentally handicapped, or I could see them as angels bringing me the most important messages of every day ó to ask what I am doing here with my life on this earth, and to remind me that I am welcome.” From the most unlikely source these two delivered a daily round of challenge and hospitality.

Take that thought and turn with it to the scriptures where there was another Adam . . . to whom a similar question was asked. Genesis gives us the setting as Adam walked with Eve in the cool air of the Garden of Eden. The two of them, alike, heard the sound of God being very near. Predictably human, they tried to hide from the presence of the Holy One. But God persisted and asked the obvious, even though in the Divine Heart the answer was already known. God asked Adam, but meant it for Eve, too: “Where are you, Adam?”

It was an early question of the spiritual direction variety and so important to wonder about: “Where are you?” “Who are you?” “Why are you trying to hide?” “What are you doing here?”

I remember a story once told of Kirk Douglas when he was at the height of his acting fame. He was driving along the Pacific Highway near his home. A sailor was hitch-hiking and Douglas pulled over to pick him up. The sailor hopped into the car and looked at the iconic actor only to exclaim, “My God, do you know who you are?” Douglas said it remained one of the most amusing and yet haunting question of his life.

So, ask it here and wonder, especially as a new season brings us back: Where are you, Adam . . . or George or Joan or Nanette? Who are you . . . Bob or Wendy or Mark? What are you doing here . . . Geordie or Deb or Ellen? It’s good and plenty for us to wonder on!

And then, as with Leslie in Henri’s story, there was another welcome of Biblical vintage, too. What a good thing for us that hospitality and welcome play so large a role in the scriptures and larger than we can ever measure! Welcome and hospitality that are both particular and universal ó for each and for all.

No story says it more poignantly than the one that Jesus told of the prodigal son and his return after a time away. I need not fill in the details because we all know the way it unfolds. The demand for an early inheritance, riotous living, sibling anger, a family in

discord and incalculable mercy ó it's all there. But without getting stuck on the hooks, if there is nothing else we hear in the story it needs to be of the Father's welcome home! And if any word or gesture needs to stick and to stay, it's of the One with elder wisdom opening wide those arms that for so long had been waiting and wanting - embracing the one who finally came home.

So it is . . . for us today, each and all, to hear the questions and to experience the affirmation: "What are you doing here?" and "Welcome!" "Who are you?" and "Come on in!" "Where are you?" and "There's plenty of room for all of us!"

And this, too: "What day is it?" Pooh asked. "Today!" Piglet squeaked. "Ah, my favorite day!" Pooh exclaimed. For this is the day and the season that the Lord has made and given! Let us rejoice and be glad! Amen.

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¹ Google Search: A.A. Milne, Pooh Quotes, 2013.

² "Spiritual Impact: Encounters with Henri Nouwen" by Dan Wakefield, Christian Century, March 19-26, 1997, pp 301-302.

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