

## You Can't Go Home Again

July 9, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There is a conventional wisdom, which maintains *you can't go home again* whether you are a prophet or a pipe-layer. This syndrome of no *respect* sets in before you get past the city limits. Most of this lack of respect comes out of the persistent inclination of the elders of the community to always see the generation it spawned, not as individuals, but in terms of how they are related to the elders. For instance, Jesus was Mary's boy and "the son of the carpenter." This is self-definition in terms of the *tribe*, and is as old as civilization itself.

In the time of Jesus, almost everything about a person had to do with the place and social standing into which a child was born. *Who* you were came from *whose you were*. Unless there was a massive social upheaval, such as a war or a famine, or some other disaster, people lived in the same communities for generations. Furthermore, the ancestral ways were handed down to the next generation. Priests or Levites and carpenters

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were sons of priests, Levites and carpenters, and they would marry daughters of priests, Levites and carpenters. All the things that perplex late adolescents of our time.....what am I going to do with my life, who am I going to marry, and where will I live.....in Israel all those things were decided by the eldership of the family. Identity was given, not acquired. It was inherited, not sought after through a myriad of choices accompanied by a host of guidance counselors and vocational psychologists. In *our* mobile society it is almost expected that grown children will leave or change their life-style, but to violate this norm in Hebrew culture was to ask for deep trouble.

For instance, look at the poor Prodigal Son. He in essence tells his father to *drop dead* so he can acquire his inheritance. He is going to do his own thing. He sets out from his home and traditional society for a *far country* where he loses not only his trust fund, but his identity and moral fiber as well. When you look at it,

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how much more identity or morality can a Jewish boy lose than winding up slopping hogs for a Gentile pig farmer, and eventually even slopping *with* the hogs himself (Lk. 15:12-16). It would be as unthinkable as a good fundamentalist going to work at Jack Daniels.

Of course, there would be those in the time of Jesus who would leave home to study with a noted rabbi in Jerusalem or join a Jewish ascetic group such as the Essenes, or *pious ones*. The elders of the family or community would sanction this, and these young people would move along under the tutelage of these surrogate *parents*. *But*, it would be quite shocking for Jesus to leave home to do *his* thing, and refuse to submit to the teaching of a traditional rabbi. This must have contributed heavily to the Nazarenes' skepticism about him. In addition, Jesus called a group together to do the *same thing* in their villages that *he* had done in *his*. They, too, had to break with their families and handed-down occupations to follow Jesus. No wonder

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the villagers of Nazareth *took offense* at him (Mk. 6:3), even as his family had done on an earlier visit when they thought he was *beside himself* (Mk. 3:21).

Jesus is not saying that having strong family values and traditional allegiances cuts one off from God, but he is *clear* that the origin of all self-definition is in God the Father and that all other allegiances are to be subordinated to the will of the Father. So it is that Jesus can tell a potential disciple that to follow him the candidate will have to become more homeless than animals (Mt. 8:18-20) and as dependent as the birds of the air for daily sustenance from God (Mt. 6:26). Another would-be disciple is told that following Jesus and the call of the kingdom must take priority over nursing an aged parent near death (Mt. 8:21-22). If one's heart is set on security becoming a follower of Jesus, like the wealthy young aristocrat, then he will go away sorrowful due to "great possessions" (Mk. 10:17-22).

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The *new wine* the kingdom of God poured into the convert's life presents an inevitable conflict of loyalties, and household commitments do not escape it: *For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household* (Mt. 10:35-36).

*Who are my mother and my brothers*, he asked (Mk. 3:33-35)? And looking at those who sat around him, he said, *Here are my mother and my brothers!* *Whoever does the will of God are my brother and my sister and my mother.* No longer are blood relatives and members of the tribe regarded as sisters or brothers as opposed to strangers. In Jesus Christ *ALL* are sisters and brothers.

The key word in all of this is *Commitment*. One of the major benefits of Baptism is the expanded family of

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God that becomes available to us and that we may enjoy from that day forward. We are no longer just the son or daughter of so-and-so; we are the children of God. We enter the worldwide fellowship of believers and are a brother and sister to all and we are, literally jolted out of our insularity as we become self-defined by Kingdom love. It is, in the waters of Baptism and in the fire of Gospel love, that we are changed from being narrow *Nazarenes*, as scripture puts it, to unrestricted lovers in Christ Jesus our Lord. All we can do is remain faithful in proclaiming the Good News, as Jesus did, and leave the rest to God.

**AMEN.**