

## The Homecoming

A Sermon by Donald Mackenzie  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
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Text: God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. Isaiah 61:11b

Readings: Isaiah 61: Matthew 5:1-11

Today we come to the final beatitude, a blessing that reaches deep into the well of both reassurance and courage. For, as Jesus says, walking the path that God encourages us to walk can be dangerous, even fatal. But, fear not, he says, because there will be healing. This final moment of Jesus' blessings holds in its soul the entire spectrum of possibilities and in the power of its message, lifts us and brings us hope. But brothers and sisters, once we start down this road, this road of cooperating with God's purposes for justice and peace, there is no turning back. And that is good news because that road is the only road home.

The word "home" whether it reflects good memories, current reality or simply the hope for that mysterious something inside the word "healing" is a pointer. It points toward a time when what is now broken will be healed. And, let's be truthful, much is now broken. That's why that saying from St. Francis is so moving: "We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way. Perhaps this is why we resonate so completely with that truthful first line of Scott Peck's bestseller, *The Road Less Traveled*. "Life is difficult," he wrote. He didn't say, "sometimes life is difficult." He didn't say, "life is difficult for some people." He said, "life is difficult." Life contains pain and sorrow and loss, disappointment and grief, anger, depression, disorientation. Life is difficult.

There's an old country song, a kind of sacred song, that says, "There'll be a homecoming some morning when Jesus calls us away." These are words coming out of those rural isolated places in the Appalachian south where the rigors of trying to eke out a living from the land could be desperately painful. People from those parts needed some sort of reassurance that hope exists. They needed some sense that there is somewhere, somehow, some time, some sort of cosmic counter-balance to the pain of human existence. The song about homecoming is a song that expresses a conviction that healing will come. It will come. It is similar to what William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the early part of the twentieth century said: "Tragedy is the experience of irreparable brokenness. In God's eyes, nothing is ever irreparably broken." There will be healing for all of creation. This is God's intention.

Just think of all the other phrases in our consciousness about "home." Home is that place where our names are known and loved. Hey it's good to be back home again. I'll be home for Christmas. Home is where the heart is. I want to go home. Home, home on the range. He was homesick. Yes, the word "Home" points to that experience of healing that is the longing of every human being because life is truly difficult.

In this concluding blessing, Jesus tells two truths. First he says, that working for God's purposes is not only difficult, it's dangerous and could result in our death. People

will want to kill us for doing and saying things that reflect a movement toward full access to all human and civil rights for every human being, for taking care of the earth and for putting an end to war. These things are threatening to a status quo that is willing to accept these injustices and violent realities in order to preserve whatever privileges are a part of that status quo, privileges enjoyed by most of us. In other words, this final beatitude is a threat to our way of life. Should we follow this path, it could change us completely. Following this path could make us want to go home, wherever that is and whatever it is, more than ever before. But, lest we forget, the first word of this beatitude is blessed. Ultimately, Jesus says, following this path is a blessing.

Driving in to the church last Monday morning I passed a bus stop where people were having animated conversations and one was reading. But the next stop I passed had three people all looking for the bus, but the looks on their faces seemed to reflect something way beyond just looking for the bus. Theirs were faces from a painting or photograph designed to show that mysterious combination of anxiety and hope that is the substance of our feelings, is the substance of how our lives are framed. These were amazing faces and I was reminded of Garrison Keillor's comment about youthful country musicians singing about suffering. How can they do that? he wondered. The worst suffering they have encountered is stupendous credit card debt. But, he said, they know it's coming. That was the look I saw on those particular faces last Monday morning. They know something is coming and they hope it will be good, but they are not sure.

No one is sure. That kind of certainty does not exist. In fact, the only certainty we have is the conviction that God does intend healing for all of creation, a conviction coming from faith, or from a longing for faith. Frankly, that certainty also lives inside the doubt that such healing can really happen.

Yet, there is another certainty, one we don't think about much. It has three parts. The first is that a blessing is coming. The second is that God needs us to help with the healing, the making whole of all of creation. It is a blessing to be a part of this. God does not us to do the whole thing; just our part. Third, that work that will move toward healing can mean desperate things for us and we have plenty of evidence that those who do those things put themselves at risk. Jesus is our prime example, but we think also of Abraham Lincoln, of Mahatma Gandhi, of Martin Luther King and while those are the big names, there are countless others unknown whose lives have been sacrificed to God's purposes.

That homecoming that each one of us longs for is coming, but to help it come, we must actively pursue the things that lead to peace, to justice and to the healing of the earth. God needs each one of us to be a part of this work whether through prayer, through words or through active work on projects that contribute, once again, to full access to all human and civil rights for everyone, to the healing of the planet and to the end to war. These are the things that stand in the way of God's dreams being realized for us. These are the things that stand in the way of that great and glorious homecoming that we long for. These are the things that stand in the way of our fulfilling our callings as people of faith. May it be that now in these months and years to come, we will not be content to let others do this work. And may it be that in our thanksgivings, we will be moved to take the path that leads home, that path of blessing, though it might mean persecution or even death. Amen.