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The Journey Home

1 Corinthians 1:9

This is a gifted church. One of the great privileges of being your pastor is to see the many gifts of our members come together to make Westminster's mission effective. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is directed to a gifted church as well. But the Corinthian church is a congregation in turmoil because they don't understand how to use their gifts. They assume that their gifts are a reflection of how deeply God is pleased with them. They see their gifts as an indication that they have already arrived as spiritual persons. In their arrogance, they allow their gifts to become a divisive force in the church. They argue about which gifts are more important and which leaders should be given greater authority. Factions are created which threaten both the unity of the church and its capacity to carry out a significant mission.

And so it is that Paul challenges the Corinthians to recognize their short-sightedness. Their gifts are not the proof of God's favor for those who have already arrived. They are an expression of God's grace for those who are struggling to become what God intends them to be. Paul argues that living as God's people in the world means knowing that we have not arrived. To follow Christ is to be on a journey.

The nature of this journey is expressed in the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel. It is near the end of Jesus' ministry and he is preparing his followers for dangerous times. He is seated with his disciples on the Mount of Olives at a place where they have a panoramic view of the temple complex. As they look out on the temple and its grounds the disciples question him about a statement he made earlier. He had predicted the temple's complete destruction. This was a statement which attracted the attention of the disciples. The temple is the most visible and enduring institution that they know. They cannot imagine a world in which it does not exist. It would be like standing on the mall in Washington DC and having a vision of the desolation of everything in sight. How difficult it would be to imagine the destruction of every significant building of our national capital. So the disciples press Jesus to tell them more. When will it happen? What are the signs to which they should pay attention?

Jesus responds by warning them to beware of the "spin doctors," who in those days were called false prophets. Jesus wants his followers to understand that this is a catastrophe that powerful political voices will try to frame for their own political advantage. Some will resort to scare tactics claiming that the end of the world is near.

Jesus challenges his disciples to see through the political spin. This is not the end, but a new beginning. The collapse of the temple system points to the vindication of Jesus' life and work. The destruction of the temple should be seen as a sign that God is breaking down all the barriers that divide the human family. The future does not belong to institutions that dispense God's favor to some people while condemning or excluding others. The future is about the journey that helps us discover who we are. It is a journey we make in the light of God's grace, which is poured out on all humanity. This journey leads us to the true home which God intends for every human being.

In Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*, he describes the journey home that began during his childhood. One year the principal of his school prepared for the possibility of a winter blizzard by assigning to each student who lived in the country a home in town where they could stay until the storm was over. Each student knew in advance where to go to spend the night in case a storm would strike on a school day, shutting down the country roads. Keillor was assigned to the Kloeckls, an older couple who lived in the little green cottage by the lake. When he received a slip of paper with their name on it he walked by their house to size it up. Their cottage looked to him like the kind of magical place you would hope to come upon if you were a child lost in the forest. Keillor describes his relationship with this home in these words:

I imagined the Kloeckls had personally chosen me as their storm child because they liked me. "Him!" they had told Mr. Detman. "In the event of a blizzard we want that boy! The skinny one with the thick glasses!"

No blizzard came during the school hours that year, all snowstorms were conveniently evening or weekend ones, and I never got to stay with the Kloeckls, but they were often in my thoughts and they grew large in my imagination. My Storm Home.

Blizzards aren't the only storms and not the worst by any means. I could imagine worse things. If the worst should come, I could go to the Kloeckls and knock on their door. "Hello," I'd say, "I'm your storm child."

"Oh, I know," she'd say, "I was wondering when you'd come. Oh, it's good to see you. How would you like a hot chocolate and an oatmeal cookie?"

Paul invites the Corinthians to see their gifts as the basic materials needed to build a storm home. That is what the church is meant to be. The church was never meant to be our final destination. It is a source of support and protection as we go through the storms that punctuate our journeys. It is a place where young and old alike can come and knock on the door in the confidence that hospitality lies within. It is a place where someone cares enough to keep the hot chocolate and cookies ready.

Sometimes we need people who do extravagant things to remind us of the nature of our journey home. The ministry of Mother Theresa in Calcutta was an effort to provide a storm home for people who did not even have a bed in which to die. A reporter once spent a day with Mother Theresa. He accompanied her as she made her rounds. He watched as she cleaned the wounds of an injured woman. He looked on as she wiped the brow of a fevered child. He was with her while she held the hand of a dying man. After seeing all this, the reporter said to her, "I wouldn't do what you do for a million dollars." And Mother Theresa said, "Neither would I do it for a million dollars."

Storm homes are like that. This is the use that God wants us to make of the gifts that have been entrusted to us. The journey home is an exercise in grace.