

Aunt Em had just come out of the house to water the cabbages when she looked up and saw Dorothy running toward her. "My darling child," she cried, folding the little girl in her arms, "Where in the world did you come from?" "From the land of Oz", said Dorothy gravely, "and here is Toto, too. And oh, Aunt Em, I am so glad to be home."

Home. It is a loaded word. It can cause emotion of great happiness. It can also cause emotion of sadness of what might have been. Someone said that home is the one place you go and they can't throw you out. I wish that was always true. Everyone needs that place called home to which they can always belong and feel secure and cared for.

Our text in Luke is the story of Jesus returning home. He is now living in Capernaum. He comes to his home town, Nazareth. On the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue, as was his custom. It is the first mention of synagogue. And the synagogue is one of the supreme contributions of Israel. In the Old Testament, people worshipped at "high places." Later, they worshipped at the temple. In the high places (local shrines) and the temple worship was largely a matter of sacrifice and ritual. When the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed it seemed a shattering and ultimate disaster. Psalm 137 says that by the rivers of Babylon the people sat down and wept when they remembered Zion. Their captors tormented them saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land." The altars of sacrifice were destroyed, so worship was destroyed. How could they worship?

The answer was the rise of the synagogue. It was a meeting place – not a place for sacrifices. It was a place for offering up of prayers and praises to God. It was a place for listening to instruction on the law.

Religion moved more and more from the realm of outward acts of sacrifice toward the cultivation of mind, heart and moral conscience. The rise of the synagogue may be compared, in historical significance to the invention of the printing press, but in some ways it marked and even greater revolution. Worship becomes independent of external and sensuous sacrifices.

God, the righteous one desired that people serve God by moral obedience. Maybe in their study of the scriptures they read from the prophet, Amos. God is speaking. "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream." Or maybe from the prophet Micah. "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? God has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Jesus, in his home town, goes to the synagogue, as was his custom.

He made it a habit to attend synagogue. Why did Jesus do that?

Nazareth is a little place. It is inhabited by ordinary people.

The service at the synagogue seems hardly inspiring.

The synagogue was associated with time and place which called people into the presence of God. That is what church is to us. The church is the people and we remind ourselves that we are the church where ever we are.

But we are the gathered church on Sunday because we as a people want to come into the presence of God. We are intentional about that. I know that is shallow talk for people who say they don't need to go to the church to worship God – after all, God is everywhere. I learned that in confirmation class. One of the questions in our catechism book was "Where is God?"

PILGRIM

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The answer to be given was, "God is everywhere." Why can't God be found equally well out under the open sky, on the hills and mountains, in the fields? Why can't God be found when people are playing together as well as when going to church? God is on the 1st tee or the 18th tee also.

Theoretically, the answer to that is yes. In honest fact, God is generally not found there. I don't go to the 1st tee on the golf course to find God.

Jesus knew that God was everywhere – in the beauty of a Galilean lily or under the silence of the stars. But He knew God there because he knew God also in the place where – since he was a little boy – he had gone to think of God – in the synagogue. The synagogue is that place consecrated to God's presence. I think that is part of our grief of leaving this location.

We know God's presence in this place. We are intentional about it.

Another reason Jesus went to synagogue is that it linked the present to the past. Part of the importance of the Bible is that it connects us with people just like us in the past who have tried to understand what it meant to be faithful people of God. That is one of the reasons we read Scripture.

We are reminded at worship of our continuity with the past. That rich heritage provides a foundation for our own day.

I think another reason Jesus went to synagogue was for the fellowship. It is in that fellowship of others, those we come to know, to appreciate, to care about that we kindle the fire of spirit in life. Our meaning of what it means to be the People of God is bound up with this fellowship we call Pilgrim. Jesus is asked to read the Scripture for the day. The text is from Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It is a gospel that sets life free.

From his understanding of God in the synagogue, Jesus called the congregation at the synagogue to see God's presence in the ordinary place, in the ordinary people.

So Jesus comes home. It is there that he begins to live out what he understands to be the call of God to his life. After he finishes the lesson for the day, which he read standing, he sat – a signal that the rabbi is going to teach. Jesus said to his family, neighbors, friends – "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." I am going to do this. The hometown folks were moved by his gracious words. But they were soon to discover that this Kingdom of God was far more inclusive than they wanted it to be.

The church would do well to remember the text Jesus read from Isaiah.

The Gospel is a freeing gospel. It is a gospel of hope for the poor, the oppressed, those bound and those who are blind. The poor also includes the poor in spirit. The oppressed include those who cannot make a living wage and are students in schools that spend all their time on discipline instead of educating. Those bound includes those bound in jobs they do not like, bound in a way of living that they are unable to escape. The blind also includes those who cannot see the Kingdom that God brings. Let those who have ears to hear, hear the words of God for us today.