

The Image of Home

By Laura Smit

"How appropriate or effective is it to rely on the image of a Waiting Father to communicate the reality of God's grace? To many of my generation, such a metaphor calls up horrible images.... There are too many connotations of regression, of going back to a time when we had no responsibility and could make no decisions, even if we wanted to. Adults who long to return to the irresponsibility of childhood are adults with problems, and that's not what our presentation of Christian faith and life should cater to."

THOMAS WOLFE told us long ago that we are incapable of going home again, but undaunted we keep trying. This past year's television lineup is filled with examples of families of one sort or another trying to create homes. We've even been invited to "Come home to NBC." Geraldine Page won an Academy award for her portrayal of an old woman trying to recapture her home in the film *The Trip to Bountiful*. This year, Glenn Close was nominated for her role as the ultimate villain, a homewrecker. James Dobson tours the country speaking to capacity crowds about the primacy of the family. Garrison Keillor rose to national prominence by speaking every week to our longing for the now lost home, Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot." Phil Collins sings, "Take me home," -to a place I can no longer remember but which I know is there.

Seems so long I've been reaching
still don't know what for
I've got no far horizons
I don't wish upon a star
I've been a prisoner all my life
and I can see you, but I don't remember
Take me home, 'cause I don't remember.¹

Like Collins, we do not always find it easy to remember the home we are trying so hard to re-capture, but our feeling of homelessness testifies that there must be a home somewhere. One billboard suggests that it's at Mr. Fables'.

Restauranteurs and network television executives aren't the only ones

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¹Phil Collins, "Take Me Home," *No Jacket Required* (New York: Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1985).

trying to tap into this longing for home. Various Christians engaged in the business of contextualizing the gospel have also taken notice and begun to stress the image of going home in their writing, singing, and speaking. Amy Grant, Benny Hester, Mylon LeFevre, Phil Keaggy—all popular Christian singers selling enormous numbers of records and tapes—have recorded songs within the last few years that invite people to come home to the Waiting Father.

It's not a new image in the Christian tradition, but it is especially popular today. We are the runaway children, estranged from the God who loves and wants us. We are promised acceptance back home. We can get back on speaking terms—even on hugging and laughing terms—with Dad again. Or, home may take on more communal associations: the discovery of a group that accepts me and takes me in. Or, again, home may be expressed in the desire to marry and start "my own" family.

These images all figure in Christian theology at various points. But not every use of the home image is helpful in the context of contemporary American culture. Our familial structures and rites of passage to adulthood are different from those of first century Palestine. The homecoming imagery of the Bible, intended to be a picture of acceptance and grace, may instead connote failure and irresponsibility to contemporary hearers if it is not applied with sensitivity and imagination.

I

Sitting in O'Hare airport late one Christmas morning, I waited to go home. It would only be for two and a half days, but I had a full suitcase and a large carry-on. Presents. Making money for a change and being away from my family had led me to be extravagant. I was eager to give my gifts to the loved, missed people for whom they had been so carefully chosen.

Getting off the plane at Kent County International Airport late in the afternoon, I saw my family gathered to meet me. No one ran to the gate to embrace me, but the broad smiles testified to the real emotion at having me home again. It was great to walk into my parents' house, so spacious and ordered after the squalor of my own place. Exchanging presents that evening gratified all my hopes for the gifts I had brought, although I was obliged to try to convince everyone that I really hadn't spent much money.

When I got up next morning, craving soda water, as I always do after a long night's sleep (especially after a celebration with wine and rich food the night before), I realized with dismay that my parents' refrigerator had never encountered such a thing. There were no croissants, and the only jam was full of sugar. The coffee was in the cupboard, not the refrigerator, and it was decaffeinated. With a sigh, I set about making some tea.

My mother walked in as I was singing along to a pop song on the radio. She looked surprised. "You used to listen to such nice music," she said, mildly enough. We curled up with the paper in the living room—Mom, Dad, assorted siblings, and I—basking in the after-holiday languor. We laughed and told stories, catching up with one another after months

of absence. I let slip that I had been out to eat the Sunday before, in a restaurant. There was no comment, but the banter stopped for a moment. I watched the lips compress.

When I again flew home two days later, this time going the other way, I wondered: What did the prodigal son feel like the morning after the party? What would I feel like after this year of freedom, having to move back home? Was that place even home to me any more? Certainly, it was no model of the "free acceptance" of coming home to God.

Home is attractive for many of us precisely because it is irretrievable. If we, like Dorothy, were given a magic pair of ruby slippers to transport us back home at the click of our heels, how many of us would go?

Garrison Keillor certainly wouldn't return to Lake Wobegon for more than a short visit. The folksy nostalgia of Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" barely masks the bitterness he feels toward the up-bringing that trained him in guilt and narrow-mindedness. Keillor's popularity is based on the accuracy with which he reflects his audience's own feelings about the home they left behind. It's no accident that his newest book is entitled *Leaving Home*. This tension between longing for and resentment toward home is seen elsewhere as well, though it's not always presented with Keillor's finesse. The same media that seek to glorify the family routinely present parents as incompetent and dependent on their more sophisticated children. And when a teenager runs away or is estranged from parents in the movies or on television, it is virtually always the fault of the parents.

Moving back home with mom and dad is not the goal of any adult person of my acquaintance. In fact, many adults find the obligatory sojourns home at Christmas or Easter to be far more strained than my own mild experience of displacement, draining and humiliating encounters with parents they have grown beyond and who have not yet learned to respect the adulthood of their children. There is a longing for homecoming and reunion after estrangement which finds expression in our culture, but it masks a much deeper disillusionment and bitterness about the actual state of family relationships, especially between parents and their adult children.

Given this widespread feeling, how appropriate or effective is it to rely on the image of a Waiting Father to communicate the reality of God's grace? To many of my generation, such a metaphor calls up horrible images. Here's one from Harold, a resident of Lake Wobegon who resents his upbringing and has ninety-five theses against his parents:

You call me on the phone to ask, "Why don't you ever call us? Why do you shut us out of your life?" So I start to tell you about my life, but you don't want to hear it. You want to know why I didn't call. I didn't call because I don't need to talk to you anymore. Your voice is in my head, talking constantly from morning to night. I keep the radio on, but I still hear you and will hear you until I die, when I will hear you say, "I told you," and then something else will happen.²

Harold knows about parents who wait, and it's making him neurotic. He is already stuck worshipping a god made over in his parents' image. Our task as proclaimers of the good news is to set all the Harolds of this world free from a false image of the God who waits for them. One way to begin that liberating process is to be more discreet in our use of parental imagery.

And I do mean parental, not just patriarchal. Many feminists today have attacked the traditional imagery of God the Father as too male-dominated, but the problem goes beyond problems of masculine and feminine language. In fact, in our culture, where mothers still bear the major responsibility for child-raising, an image of God as Mother is, if anything, more repressive and stifling than the image of God as Father. There are too many connotations of regression, of going back to a time when we had no responsibility and could make no decisions, even if we wanted to. Adults who long to return to the irresponsibility of childhood are adults with problems, and that's not what our presentation of Christian faith and life should cater to.

I can hear the objections. "We are always infants in the arms of God." Maybe. But God also wants us to be responsible, to grow up, to move toward being perfect even as God is perfect. Some of the resistance to the image of the Waiting Father within people of my generation may be dealt with through contrast, by saying that God is *not* like Harold's parents, who see him doing nothing right in their eyes. We are accepted into God's family as loved children who can do nothing wrong in God's eyes. The problem with that is that I don't know anyone who has ever experienced such a parent. There are limits to imagination.

II

"Freedom has to be a good thing, doesn't it?" Demi Moore asked, looking plaintively into Rob Lowe's heart-melting eyes. The recent box-office smash, *About Last Night*, features two young people who are trying to establish a somewhat permanent relationship, to create a home. They find that they don't have adequate training for this. The absolute value of freedom, which is the most sacred thing they know, does not allow for the permanent commitment they feel they should be making to one another.

It is precisely this desire for freedom and independence that makes the "home" image so problematic for the people to whom we minister. Some Christians tackle this search for freedom head on, attacking it as resistance to God's will and presence. Centuries ago John Donne prayed "Batter my heart, three-person'd God." Today, Rez Band sings about being taken a P.O.W.

He said that He had your number
You cut the telephone line
You said you needed a reason

²Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), p. 274.

He said, "There ain't much time"
You kept tryin' to avoid it
He kept knockin' on the door
In a flash it was over
You were a prisoner of war
But when you lose, you win
That's the way it is
That's when the love comes down.³

I confess, I find that idea appalling. I'm a product of my culture. Freedom is an ultimate value. It's non-negotiable. I don't really want to be justified against my will, thank you all the same. And John Donne's ravishing imagery revolts all my feminist sensibilities. Grant that this image of becoming a slave to God has been important throughout Christian tradition. Grant also that some of my resistance to it comes from my sinful refusal to allow God sovereign control in all of my life. I still question the appropriateness of applying it to groups of people whose problem is most typically not an unwillingness to submit to authority, but rather an inability to assume personal responsibility. This is true of most of the young people with whom I work. They have adopted a passive, cynical, and irresponsible attitude toward life. This is also true of many women, whose task is not to learn how to submit to but rather how to resist their own enculturation and to accept responsibility without feeling they're doing something particularly heroic. So, I'm with Demi Moore. I want freedom *and* commitment. But if I have to choose, I'll go with freedom.

Of course, part of the problem with such thinking is the very fact that freedom and commitment are played off against each other as mutually incompatible. Such an understanding equates freedom with autonomy, so that any committed relationship becomes a lessening of freedom. And commitment is equated with mindless submission and loss of will. But God, who is both free and faithful, fulfills our desire for both freedom and committed relationship.

Freedom, to be meaningful, must be *from* something. Paul proclaimed the good news of freedom from religious legalism. That's a wonderful freedom, but most of us have never felt ourselves enslaved by it anyway. Yet, we certainly know about other kinds of enslavements. Hans Ming suggests that in our achievement-oriented society many people find themselves enslaved by the compulsion to produce, a compulsion linked in the minds of many with parental demands. The freedom of faith is thus freedom from having to achieve things. Christ brings us freedom from "dependence on and obligations to the false gods who drive [us] mercilessly to new achievements: money or career, prestige or power, or whatever is the supreme value."⁴

³Glen Kaiser and Jon Trott, "Love Comes Down," *Rez Ban: Between Heaven and Hell* (Chatsworth, Calif.: Sparrow Corporation, 1985).

This freedom may also be from demands of family if that has become the supreme value. In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis tells of a woman obsessed with her role as a mother; she has allowed motherhood to become an idol to her.

There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demonic it will be if it rebels. It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels.⁵

Loyalty to family and home is a good thing, but it is a good thing routinely twisted into a bad thing. We cannot dismiss the need many people have to distance themselves from their families as wholly illegitimate, nothing more than the result of a false ideology of individualism. It is more than that, and when we proclaim the gospel in terms of the very structure from which many people so desperately need to be freed, we should not be surprised to find that they are not attracted to what we offer. Instead, we need to announce the good news that in Christ we are set free, not just from the tyranny of materialism or oppressive political power, but also from the threat of being determined and controlled by the family in which we find ourselves, from the irresponsibility of unending infancy, and from the futile efforts to satisfy demanding grown-ups who refuse to be satisfied by even our best efforts.

This kind of freedom is captured in the Israelites' liberation from the flesh-pots of Egypt, which they earned by producing a set number of bricks each day. The Exodus story appeals to the home-longing as well as to the need for freedom, and it shows that the imagery of home can be used in conjunction with the proclamation of liberation. But this is not a story about going home to mom and dad. It is a story about individuals being formed into a community and a community finding a homeland. As such, it appeals more directly than the parable of the prodigal son to our conviction that there must be something better somewhere, the very conviction that makes it so hard for some of us to hear the gospel in terms of going back to what we have already tried and found wanting.

This is not the freedom of autonomy. It is rather the freedom of being constituted a people in covenant with a free God, radically different from the gods of Egypt. At the time of the Exodus, God said to the people of Israel: "I will be what I will be." Moses proclaimed an alternative God and so led the Israelites out as a free people to form an alternative society.⁶

Home is thus understood in terms of the forming of a new community or family. The New Testament vision of marriage and family transcended (and of the whole people of God as the basic social unit) should be a shaping force in our own communities.

⁴Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), p. 589.

⁵C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 97-98.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 16-17.

Then nuclear families are placed always within the extended context of the church, the new family to which we owe first loyalty. Rather than using the home-image of return to parental authority, why not call people to the creation of a new home, a new community within which hierarchies are challenged, gifts are affirmed, and responsibility is encouraged.

III

This time you've got nothing to lose
You can take it, you can leave it
Whatever you choose
I won't hold back anything
And I'll walk away a fool or a king
Some love is just a lie of the mind
It's make believe until it's only a matter of time
And some might have learned to adjust
But then it never was a matter of trust.⁷

Jesus is singing to me on the radio this morning. All the way home from Kalamazoo in my car, song after song promises faithfulness, some commitment that deserves the risk of giving up just a bit of my control. "You've got nothing to lose," he tells me, "since I'm the one taking the risk of foolishness, not you. What do you say?"

Most of us ultimately look for home not with mom and dad or in community, but with someone else, a partner, someone who neither stands in authority over us nor is one-sidedly dependent on us. Most of us still build homes with a partner with whom we have a reciprocal dependence and love. It's hard to talk that way about God, the Wholly Other, but there are centuries of Christian tradition behind the idea of talking that way about Jesus, God incarnate. God is courting us in Jesus.

Kierkegaard tells a story about a king who loves a peasant woman. How can he woo and win her? If he comes to her in all his splendor, she may not love him for himself, but instead for his office and for what he can offer. Or, she may be frightened away or feel too unworthy. So, instead he comes to her incognito, dressed as a peasant himself, and wins her heart.⁸ It's not a new story. Most fairy tales include some variation on it. But that is how Christ woos us.

It is Jesus who invites us home. The old gospel song "Softly and Tenderly" doesn't talk about going home to a Big Daddy waiting for us, but to our husband, our love who names us as his beloved and calls us to share our lives with him. The poetry of Song of Solomon 2:10-13 conveys it strikingly.

⁷Billy Joel, "A Matter of Trust," *The Bridge* (New York: CBS, Inc., 1986).

⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 32-34.

My lover spoke and said to me,
"Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one, and come with me.
See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling,
my beautiful one, come with me."

The hard times are over, and the bridegroom has a home waiting. The ultimate fairy-tale turns out to be true!

IV

Lewis says that in each of us there is "the desire for our proper place," although that desire is often misdirected and we fail to see the connection between that desire and the promises of the gospel. We carry within us a "sense of exile," a stabbing hunger for the beauty which we seem somehow to have mislaid. Marcel Proust dips a madeleine in some tea and is overcome with longing for a once-golden past. Garrison Keillor sets down his briefcase for a moment in the men's room and has it stolen, losing the most luminous story he has ever written, and dedicates the rest of his life to trying to retrieve it. Heaven opens during a particular piece of music, and you play it over and over again, trying to remember as the echoes grow fainter. Or, a particular patch of fall color brings tears to your eyes, and you reach for the camera in the vague hope that a Kodak print will somehow allow you to possess this glimpse of a better place.

There is in all of us a suspicion that we are not where we ought to be, that we are exiles here. Even if we should find a community that accepts and welcomes us, even if we should find a spouse who loves and nurtures us, we still know ourselves to be displaced. Flashes of beauty or nostalgia hover at the outside edges of our awareness, hinting at a memory that never comes clear. We're like the amnesia victim so loved by scriptwriters for afternoon soap operas.⁹ We are stranded far from home, unable, in fact, to remember where home is-yet knowing that, wherever it is, it is not here. Although we are unable to articulate where we belong, still we sense the uneasiness of being uprooted and misplaced. As one acute observer of contemporary America put it, we are "born to run."

Someday girl, I don't know when,

⁹See Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), pp. 20-22.

we're gonna get to that place
Where we really want to go
And we'll walk in the sun
But till then tramps like us
Baby we were born to run.¹⁰

The Bible gives voice to this longing in the vision it presents us of *shalom*, what Brueggemann has called "the freight of the dream of God."¹¹ The Old Testament is full of pictures of the promised land, flowing with milk and honey, where lions and lambs lie down together. But I am city born and bred, and the picture that makes my heart sing is of a city.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:23-27).

God says: "The old order of things has passed away. See, I am making everything new!" And with those words, we receive a promise that there is more coming than we know or experience.

We are assured that there *is* a home for us, that there is a better world, and that we are citizens there. Jesus has gone before to prepare a place for us. The longing we feel for the beautiful somewhere we almost glimpse is bearable when we know that it does have a proper object, one that will not disappoint us.

V

But we mustn't throw out the parental image altogether, if only because it is prominent in the Bible. On the airplane back to Buffalo, after my Christmas trip home, I thought of another homecoming, one that seemed then and seems now to be a more apt image of our going home to God. I was only seven. The scene was once again O'Hare airport. I remember standing with my younger sister, Jane, on the observation deck in the Windy City, letting our matching dresses fill up with air like balloons. We were waiting for our new sister. We watched the plane set down, then rushed inside to meet it. Crowds of people, many of them children, poured off the plane. One man stopped in front of us. "Mr. and Mrs. Smit?" he asked. He held a solemn little girl with huge brown eyes pulled wide open.

¹⁰Bruce Springsteen, "Born to Run," *Born to Run* (New York: Columbia Records, 1975).

¹¹Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward A Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, rev. ed. (New York: United Church Press, 1982), p. 16.

In the arms of that tall man, she found herself at eye level with my tall father. He smiled a welcome, and she—still solemn, still wide-eyed—reached out unhesitatingly toward him. She was ours.

All the way home from Chicago in the cramped Chevy sedan, she sat on my mother's lap and was carsick. Even though I was only seven, an age known for its squeamishness, I didn't mind. She was ours.

Years later, when she left home to live out of a car with her best friend, she was still ours. And when she came back, and my mother told me fiercely that I was not to provoke her no matter how provoking she might be to me (for fear that she might leave again), and I responded, echoing the prodigal's elder brother: "Haven't I served you well and faithfully all these years, and yet you've never bent over backwards to avoid offending me," I still knew that she was ours and always would be.

And we are God's. Despite both our infantile incontinence and our adolescent rebellions, God claims us. God welcomes us home, as parents joyfully receive a long-awaited infant and also as a father staring down the road sights the figure of his humbled, broken son. But the city in which we make our home for eternity will be a city we have worked to build, a city that contains within it the treasures we, rulers in God's kingdom, have brought with us. Our homecoming banquet will also be our wedding feast. And we will come home as members of a community in which the first are last and the last first.

Let us extend the invitation to all those who are displaced to come home, not only to a waiting father and mother, but also to a shining city, a faithful spouse, and a community of loving friends. And when the invitation is accepted, and people walk into our churches for the first time, let us make sure that they are met not by parental figures, quick to judge, protect, and direct, but by brothers and sisters in God's family, on the way to a common home.