

“The Great Return” -- Psalm 51 (NRSV)

It's good to be back **home from holidays**. I always say, as the saying goes, **“It's good to go away, but it's also good to come home.”** This is where things are familiar; this is where family and friends are found. Going away somewhere else and seeing and experiencing a few different places, people and cultures can be a great adventure, but home is where things are predictably, comfortably routine. And, thankfully, this is also the place where folks know you and accept you just as you are and are usually ready to support you through all the seasons of life.

God's grace is also like that. God never intended that we keep his grace to ourselves. God's grace is **love freely shared** even when people do not deserve it. Grace hoarded isn't grace.

Mind you, the person who thinks he or she deserves God's love, who sees himself or herself as worthy of God's special favour, has missed the point of grace completely. Grace isn't salary for what we regularly do on God's behalf. It isn't a bonus for efforts above and beyond the call of duty. Grace is **God's commitment to us** even when we are not able to commit ourselves to him. It is God's free gift based on his boundless love and our crying need.

Grace is not only free; it's **limitless**. God's supply isn't drained by his constant generosity. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the supremely wealthy businessman and philanthropist of his time, New Yorker **John D. Rockefeller** gave away dimes. A dime was actually worth something then. He was a multimillionaire, but his supply of wealth wasn't inexhaustible so he parceled it out carefully. His gifts were limited, and not everyone received. Not so with God. One of my favourite gospel songs, “He gives more grace” pinpoints this: “God's love has no limit; his grace has no measure; his power has no boundary known unto men. For out of his infinite riches in Jesus, he gives, and gives, and gives again.”

The psalmists knew this and they never neglected to **celebrate God's grace**. That's why their psalms are always in season. Think especially of David, who in **Psalm 51**, openly, honestly and fervently describes **what God's grace meant to him**.

This is David, “the man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). This man, the king, sinned deliberately, extensively and tragically, in committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband. Apart from God’s grace, **forgiveness would have been impossible**. No one could’ve or would’ve wanted to forgive him, given the enormity of what he’d done. His sin had shattered God’s law and offended God’s love. Popular respect for him would have plummeted precipitously in all the opinion polls. No sacrifice would’ve been acceptable because the entire sacrificial system was designed for unintentional and accidental sin, not for willful sin.

David’s prayers in the psalm acknowledge this terrible reality: “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering you would not be pleased” (51:16). He knows that because God’s law was broken and God’s people had been abused and harmed. He knew the enormity of his sin; in fact, he acknowledged he’d sinned against God himself: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight ...” (51:3-4a).

What could he do but cast himself on the mercy and grace of God? And that is precisely what he does. Because David treasures God’s grace so highly, he knows he cannot keep his sin to himself. He must come out with it. He cannot keep it hidden. Therefore part of his confession to God is a vow to tell others. Folded into his plea for forgiveness is his promise to make God’s grace manifest to others. And he can only do that by being completely open, honest and vulnerable himself: “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and **sinner will return** to you” (51:13). Grace is meant to be shared, not stored. Hand in hand with David’s own return to God is his pledge to call to others to make **“the great return.”**

1. It is sinners who return.

The word **“return”** is used in many connections. People come back home from holidays. Fishermen return to port after long days and nights at sea. Soldiers return after months of arduous duty overseas. Patients come home from the hospital. Children return to the house, shoes muddied from their explorations, on their homeward stroll from school. And **every one of these returns sparks a happy reunion**. They’ve been missed; their place at the table has been empty; but now the fellowship of kinship and love has been restored.

The “restoration” (51:12) or “return” (51:13) of which David speaks is so “great” because those who are being asked to come home are **moral failures**, those from whom we would normally, naturally shy away, those whose words have been foul, those whose acts are repulsive. Ordinarily, such men and women are not welcome. They’ve been kicked out with angry words, such as, “Get out and never come back until you’ve got your act together!” Or they’ve been bluntly told, “Good riddance to bad rubbish!” Their cheeks must still sometimes tingle from the slam of the door in their faces. They’ve been estranged from the warmth and the acceptance of the family circle.

Yet, David, a deeply wounded sinner himself, has experienced the healing grace of the living God, and pleads with other sinners to return. True, it is as **“transgressors”** that he calls them – rebels, renegades, mutineers who have defied God’s authority and who have pitted their wills against his. He is well aware of how sinners can run right across, right against God’s will. He also calls them **“sinners”** – people who’ve missed the mark, whose lives have been aimed wide of God’s target for them, souls who’ve fallen short of God’s standard. Yet **their rebellion doesn’t have to be permanent**. Their lost lives are **retrievable**. Their veering course can be **corrected**. A mid-course correction can be made in the tack of their ship on the high seas of the world by turning their sails around and catching the wind of the One who made them and who loves them and who longs to guide them to a safer harbour. When they do, it’s **“a great return”** because God’s grace is more than a match for their failures and sin.

2. The return brings bountiful results.

The psalmist is eager to spell out all **the benefits of this return**. They are many.

Cleansing, for instance. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (51:7). This something that **William Shakespeare’s** Lady MacBeth could never understand and obtain. Try as she might, she couldn’t get rid of “the damn spot” that she thought was only on her hands, but which was, in fact, deeply staining her very soul. We can all identify with David’s feeling here. Grubbiness leaves most of us squirming and uncomfortable, like the bits of hair that stick under men’s collars after a visit to the barber. Guilt sticks to us far closer and leaves us at least secretly longing to be clean.

“Return,” David says, “and find cleansing.” Not just on the outside, but on the inside, of the heart itself, the center of our thinking and choosing: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (51:10).

Returning means fellowship as well as cleansing. What does righteousness have in common with lawlessness? How can holiness rub shoulders with iniquity? David knew – because he knew who God is – that the persistent, impenitent transgressor and sinner cannot be on good terms with a righteous and holy God. So he pleaded with God directly: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me” (51:11). In this desperate petition David acknowledges the great gulf sin brings between ourselves and God. We cannot stay with him, and he will not stay with us, as long as we continue to rebel, casting God’s grace aside like some worthless trinket. **But our return is great because it restores us to fellowship with God.**

Restored fellowship with God leads to **restored fellowship with God’s people.** There is a light in the window. The key is in the door. The porch light burns brightly. A welcome home fire brightens and warms the room. And this is what the God of all grace has long been waiting for! He, together, with all his people cry out, “Come back! All can be well again! We love you, no matter whatever it is that you have done!”

And there is great joy in that. Jesus said, “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk. 15:7; cf. 15:10). That’s why David asks, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (51:12).

Restoration also brings joy.

Cleansing, fellowship and joy: these are the benefits offered to the one who returns. Truly, God will let the repentant sinner “hear joy and gladness”; indeed, he will “let the bones that [once were] crushed rejoice” (51:8). This “great return” that David encourages us to make is not some weary trek to some dreary shack. **It’s a return home with joy.** It reverberates with celebration. It means dropping our burdens, renewing our purposes, making new friends and becoming reacquainted with God. David’s promise flashed with hope: “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you” (51:13).

3. It is to God that we return.

I've only hinted at the best feature of this return: **God is the one who is waiting for us.** Because our sin is primarily against him there is no real return except to him. That's what the late, great professor of pastoral theology and counselling, **Henri Nouwen**, who was also a deeply spiritual Roman Catholic priest, finally learned. He'd taught at some of the most famous universities in the United States. He'd been on retreat at some of the best monasteries. But he ended up finding personal peace and fulfillment by becoming a community worker at one of Jean Vanier's l'Arche communities which are now found all over the world. It is called **Dayspring**, and is located in Richmond Hill, just north of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. There he found release from his relentless, world-wide, self-important busyness and driven-ness in serving the wounded men and women with whom he lived. He became impressed with the parable of the prodigal son. He wrote a book about that incomparable story of "**the waiting father**" (**Helmut Thielicke**) And it was while he was on his way to do a film on the topic, using Rembrandt's painting of the same subject, hanging in the famous St. Petersburg Hermitage Gallery, that he suffered a heart attack, while visiting his own father one more time, on the way, in the Netherlands.

Return and escape are not the same thing. When faced with our sin – whatever it may be – we are tempted to run away. We may skip from place to place, finding a bit of relief here and a spot of respite there. But there is no solution until we return to God.

The reason for this is that **God is the cause of our problem.** Obviously, I don't mean that he caused us to sin. What I do mean is that he makes us uncomfortable in our sin. God's continual prodding makes it difficult for us to be complacent. Nudging our consciences, wrestling with our wills, he keeps us on the edge about who we are and what we are to do. **Augustine**, the early church theologian, and bishop put it this way: "We find that our hearts are restless, O God, until we find our rest in you." However, God only needles us about our problems to discourage us from finding false solutions. What God really desires is our return to himself. Who else has the full prescription for all that ails us?

How can we describe what it means to return to God? Take all the homecomings and class reunions you've ever attended and roll them into

one: you still don't have an inkling. Add to them your birthday and anniversary celebrations, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's parties and gatherings: you still have miles to go. Throw in your honeymoon, your silver and golden wedding anniversaries: you have scarcely started.

You and I are called to **return to God**. In love and compassion, in care and concern, in discipline and guidance, he is unmatched, unrivalled. God's love knows no limits, and his grace no measure. His call to us is not to "shape us up" or to "ship us out," nor to "try harder" or to "do better," but to **return!** There is no finer invitation in life.

Amen

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