

SAFE AT HOME

August 18, 2013

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They are leaving home this week. The highways are jammed with them. Travel down Interstate 75 over the next few days and you'll see station wagons, SUV's, trailers filled with stuff – college stuff – purchased recently at Bed, Bath and Beyond and Target and Wall Mart – and somewhere in the midst of the stuff is a college freshman making the journey to the college of his or her choice. Leaving home. After eighteen years of preparation. Learning to talk and walk and take out the trash and wash the dishes and say please and clean your room and algebra and Spanish and field hockey and soccer – now it is time to leave home. To leave the nest. It takes a bird about 14 days to leave the nest. It takes an American kid 18 years to leave the nest. And we think we are the most intelligent of the species. And it's not that they don't come back. They do. Sometimes in weeks. Sometimes for Thanksgiving. Sometimes for summer. Sometimes for years! But it's never quite the same. Once you leave home, you leave home.

You remember leaving home, don't you? Maybe it was to college, maybe it was to a job. Maybe it was to get married. Maybe it was to simply live on your own. But you left home. It's what we are supposed to do. Wings expand and we flutter to another tree. We are on our own – to fend for ourselves, to make our own way, to figure it out. It is a part of the human journey. It is the human journey. Leaving home.

It is, as well, the point of the game. Baseball. The point of the game in baseball is to leave home. It's what a batter wants to do, leave home. Get a hit. Make his way to the bases. It's what

the pitcher doesn't want you to do – leave home. He wants you out – out on strikes, out at first. But out. But the purpose of the game is to leave home, because you have to leave home before you can go home. You have to leave home before you can go home. In baseball it is all about home. Getting around the bases and to get home safely.

Easier said than done. Getting home safely. It's hard to get home safely. A hit is very little guarantee that you will arrive home safely. Making it to first is hard enough. But getting from first to home is a whole other thing. Lots of things have to happen if you are going to arrive home safely in baseball. Getting on base is just the first step. All sorts of peril lie in wait for you on the bases. You can get picked off. You can get caught stealing. You can be the front end of a double play. You can languish while your teammates fail to bat you in. You can get caught in a pickle. All sorts of things can happen to you on the bases and can make your going home a very difficult thing to accomplish. There is a statistic in baseball called Left on Base. These are those who left home and never got home.

Lots of things can happen between your leaving home and your getting home.

It is, I think, what the writer of Ecclesiastes was concerned with when he wrote his little piece of wisdom literature. Not baseball, of course. But the fortunes and misfortunes that lie between leaving home and going home. Lots of things happen between leaving home and going home. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," he writes. "A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up ..." and on and on it goes. The yin and the yang of life. "A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away." Life is filled with its seasons. It won't always be good and it won't always be bad. Sometimes you're out and sometimes you're safe. Life, once we leave home, doesn't always give us what we want.

In that movie *Field of Dreams* that we talked about several weeks ago, there is a character named Doc Graham. He's been a doctor in a little town up in Minnesota for fifty years. He's taken

care of bumps and bruises, coughs and measles for fifty years. Quietly loved and respected by the whole town. But he carries inside him the small ache of not achieving a childhood dream – to get a chance to take an “at bat” in a major league baseball game. He came close by playing a half an inning in the field, but he never got to the plate. And always wondered what it would have been like to face a major league pitcher and to tell about it the rest of your life. Ray Kinsella exclaims, “Fifty years ago, for five minutes you came within... y-you came this close. It would KILL some men to get so close to their dream and not touch it. God, they'd consider it a tragedy.” To which the good doctor replies, “Son, if I'd only gotten to be a doctor for five minutes, now that would've been a tragedy.”

Life does not always give us our dreams. We have our seasons. There is a time to keep and a time to lose.

It's what I love about the season of baseball. No sport has a longer season. Six months not counting the playoffs and World Series. Six months. A lot can happen in six months. 162 games. 162 games!!! Twice as many as basketball and hockey and ten times as many as football. A lot can happen in a season of six months and 162 games. Baseball is a season that allows for a lot of things to happen. Slumps and streaks. Injuries and recoveries. Trades and sales. A four strikeout game does not a season make. News of a player out for a month with an injury is not the end of the world. The baseball season allows for many seasons. It allows for the ups and the downs. The good and the bad. You don't get measured by the game or by the at bat or by the pitch – you get measured by the season. The long season. How well did you do over the season? How consistent were you over the season? It's what divides a fan from a manager. A fan views baseball one game at a time. What have you done for me lately? So and so is a bum because they struck out in the bottom of the ninth. But a manager looks at the season ... the season of seasons. The ups and the downs. The streaks and the slumps. The injuries and the recoveries. How well did you do over the season? Because like running the bases the season is filled with perils. Bad things can happen. Unexpected things can happen. Miracles can happen. Luck can happen. Fortune can happen. And it's hard to make sense of it all. It's what the great teacher in Ecclesiastes would want to tell us. Bad things

happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. There are no guarantees once you leave home.

Bob Seger – the great Motor City rocker ... and part-time theologian – wrote a song I heard a thousand times while growing up called “Hollywood Nights”. It’s a song about a Midwestern boy who is tired of living at home and he wants to go find himself out west ... “see some old friends, good for the soul”. He ends up in Los Angeles and before long finds himself charmed by the big city lights and the high rolling hills and the attractiveness of a certain young woman. All of it exerts its seductive power on the young man to the point, Seger says, that he knew “he was too far from home”. He was too far from home. The boy gives in to it all and lives the high life for a time until one morning it all crashes down upon him. The air out of the balloon. Like the prodigal son waking up in the pig sty – all alone feeding pigs and wanting to eat the pods. And now the boy wonders if he can ever go back home.

If he can ever go back home. “Will this slump in my life – will it keep me from home?” Can we ever get back home? Can you ever get too far from home?

It’s been almost 3000 years since Homer wrote his epic poem the *Odyssey*. But it’s a story we keep on telling. Because it is a story about going home. Returning from the Trojan war, Odysseus must make his way home. And home is not easy to get to. He must face the monsters and the temptresses and the forces of nature. It’s hard to get home. And sometimes the wind is at your back and sometimes the wind is against you – but always the journey is to go home. Bart Giamatti, the great former commissioner of baseball, whose tenure was cut short at a young age from a heart attack, reminds us that “All literary romance derives from the *Odyssey* and is about rejoining – rejoining a beloved, rejoining parent to child, rejoining a land to its rightful owner or rule. Romance is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. It is about restoration of the right relationship among things – and going home is where the restoration occurs because that is where it matters most.” Giamatti says that’s what baseball is about – it’s why we like it so much. It’s because it’s about going home.

Home is what matters most.

The great narrative of life, the great narrative of scripture, is about you and me trying to find our way home. We go from creation to cross to resurrection. "Our hearts are restless," Augustine wrote, "until they find their rest in thee." Life is about leaving home ... and going home. And we want to go home because home is where we are rejoined. Home is where we find ourselves. Home is where we are finally reconciled to the God who has loved us all along. The one with whom we are seeking reunion. "Our commonwealth is in heaven," wrote the apostle.

We leave home to go home.

It makes me think of Robert Frost's great poem *The Death of the Hired Man*, about a farmhand who keeps leaving the farmstead and return from season to season – to the great frustration of the farmer, who wants him to stay. He's unreliable. But now he has come back, and he is not in good health. But the farmer's had it. He doesn't want him back. But his wife appeals for the hired man, "Warren," she says, "he has come home to die. You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently. "It all depends on what you mean by home ... Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

To which she replies, "I should have called it something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Something you haven't to deserve.

And that is the good news for you and me, isn't it? That amidst the seasons of life, the perils of the bases. The ups and the downs. The times to weep and laugh. The times to hate and to love. The times to seek and lose. The times to sew and to tear. The times when we slide safely and the times when we are thrown out. None of us gets it right all the time. At best we bat .300. But home is where we are headed to. Home is something we haven't to deserve. We are saved by grace, not by works. We are in the long season. The journey. The odyssey. The way back home.

“Be sure,” wrote C.S. Lewis, “that the ins and the outs of your individuality are no mystery to God; and one day they will be no mystery to you. The mould in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key; and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many rooms.”

As John Newton – the old wicked slave trader and repentant believer – the one who understood about the seasons of life , . . as John Newton wrote in his great hymn: “Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come. Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.”