

July 4, 2021
The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 9), Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10
Psalm 48
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

“You can’t go home again.” That American adage is the title of a Thomas Wolfe novel published posthumously in 1940. It was about 2500 years earlier that the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.”

As children become adults, they venture away from the landscapes of their parents. Physically, some tiptoe only a short distance, while others stride across the globe. Such literally geographical changes of scenery are only part of the human story. Whether by tiptoe or by stride, ventures are made in so many other ways, among them educational, political, psychological, emotional, spiritual. Whether by choice or by compulsion, life leaves nothing unchanged.

Over the last few weeks, we have started resuming the activities we stopped because of the pandemic. For most of us, this has come after living for about fifteen months with more geographical restrictions than we have experienced since we were toddlers. Our bodies were fortunate to be safely sequestered in our physical homes. But the information coming into those homes blew our minds again and again, repeatedly tossing us into places we didn’t even know existed. The pandemic has improved, but our processing of its events continues. We have more freedom to move around, both physically and mentally. This gives us the space to venture into wonderings about what we have experienced and what it means, about where we have been and where we might go. I’m not sure any of us is going home again.

Apparently Jesus knew first-hand how complicated it is to venture away and then go home. His old neighbors are astounded by his teaching; their astounded-ness seems only to increase their subsequent irritation with him. Where did *Jesus* acquire such words? Why does *he* get to say them? *Elsewhere* Jesus was attracting crowds and performing miracles. *Here* the cloud of suspicion leaves him nearly powerless. Doing no good there, he ventures forth again. He seems to do so even more boldly, sending the twelve out on ventures of their own, and working his power by extension.

In this story, I imagine that we like to identify with Jesus. We are independent-minded people. Most of us left the homes of our parents when we went off for college, and then we moved where we need to go for professional success. Many of us left the religious tradition with which we grew up. We have tried to learn and to grow and to be good people who do the right thing.

I don’t doubt that we’re on board with Jesus, and still sometimes we’re the old neighbors. It’s just so hard. Maybe we’re tired. Maybe we’ve already heard more than we can take in. Maybe we just want a little predictability. Maybe we want the world to be simpler, like it was way back when. Of course, even as we think that, we know, deep down, that the world wasn’t really simpler way back then. We only thought it was. All along, there was the need for some deep healing. There still is the need for deep healing.

Today is July 4, is Independence Day. Its rough equivalent for our neighbor to the north, Canada Day, was Thursday, July 1. I wouldn't have remembered that, except for the news article that caught my eye that morning. The article was about, as the article put it, "calls to cancel Canada Day." The article began this way: "Indigenous groups have called for Canada's national celebration to be cancelled over the discovery of more than 1,000 unmarked graves, most of which are believed to belong to Indigenous children."¹ As you have probably heard, these graves were located at residential schools. The Roman Catholic Church ran the majority of the residential schools for indigenous children in Canada. The Anglican Church ran some of them. The Episcopal News Service reported this week that, perhaps not coincidentally, "A slew of church burnings across western Canada have left six churches on First Nations land badly damaged or destroyed as of Tuesday (June 29)."² One of those churches is Anglican. The United States has its own unpleasant history of Native American residential schools. The Episcopal Church ran eighteen of them.³ That history is only starting to be unpacked. The complicity of American Christianity with Native American genocide remains largely unexamined.

I haven't yet heard any calls to cancel Independence Day. Every year as July 4 approaches I debate with myself whether to note Independence Day in my sermon. The question is more pressing when July 4 falls on Sunday, as it does today. As I pondered this conundrum last week, and a few minutes after reading about the calls to cancel Canada Day, I decided to remind myself of the exact reasons for the dating of Independence Day on July 4. This is the first thing I read, on Wikipedia:

During the American Revolution, the legal separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain in 1776 actually occurred on July 2, when the Second Continental Congress voted to approve a resolution of independence that had been proposed in June by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia declaring the United States independent from Great Britain's rule. After voting for independence, Congress turned its attention to the Declaration of Independence, a statement explaining this decision, which had been prepared by a Committee of Five, with Thomas Jefferson as its principal author. Congress debated and revised the wording of the Declaration to remove its *vigorous denunciation of the slave trade* [emphasis added], finally approving it two days later on July 4.⁴

Well. I think I understand the desire to be proud of our country. And, I also see the need for deep healing. We need more prophets, prophets from every sector of our population, prophets who are willing to leave everything behind and risk taking nothing but themselves into vulnerable places. Even if we can't be that prophet, we can listen when they come to our towns, as they remind us again and again of what we have forgotten, until we truly remember, until we become fellow agents of healing.

You can't go home again, not if you understand home as the place of your birth. But you can go home, if you understand home as the place of your promise. That home—that place of promise—is the ultimate home that God has promised to all of us. It's a place that we will enter not alone, not individually, but together. And so, as you venture into post-pandemic space, take heart: the Holy Spirit has stirred the waters, and she is leading us home.

Notes

¹ Leyland Cecco, “Calls to cancel Canada Day after graves found: ‘Indigenous people paid with their lives,’” *The Guardian*, June 30, 2021, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/30/cancel-canada-day-unmarked-graves-indigenous-people> (accessed July 4, 2021).

² Renée Roden, “Canadian churches on First Nations land are burning, including St. Paul’s Anglican Church,” *Episcopal News Service*, June 30, 2021, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewservice.org/2021/06/30/canadian-churches-on-first-nations-land-are-burning-including-st-pauls-anglican-church/> (accessed July 4, 2021).

³ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “A Shocking Truth,” *The Living Church*, February 28, 2018, available online at <https://livingchurch.org/2018/02/28/a-shocking-history/> (accessed July 4, 2021).

⁴ “Independence Day (United States),” *Wikipedia*, available online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independence_Day_(United_States)) (accessed July 4, 2021).