

What we need is here

On finding our way back home

Julian Waldner

In Jesus's most famous parable, a son returns home. He is standing on the dusty road, fearing the worst. He has squandered his father's wealth and wished him dead. But then *comes that moment* so powerfully expressed in the song *Fire and Bone* by the Killers:

*When I came back empty handed
You were waiting in the road
And you fell on my neck
And you took me back home.*¹

What we human beings long for more than anything—our most basic human need—is to come home. Home. What does it evoke? Rest. A long-contracted breath released. Tears of relief. Peace. At the heart of so much of our anxious-seeking-pounding-running-desperate-striving—at the heart of it all is a longing for home. This restlessness at the heart of our humanity, this primordial longing for respite, points us home. As Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.”²

The scriptures tell us that God in Jesus has made his home with us, come to seek and save the homeless (John 1:14). God comes as one scattering seeds, which grow to be large trees giving shelter, shade, and food (Mark 4:26). Jesus invites those who are anxious and weary to come and find rest (Matt. 11:28–30). Against our self-serious attempts to make something of ourselves and the world, Jesus announces, “It is finished” (John 19:30). In Jesus, God's peace has arrived. It is here. Jesus calls us home, into the joy of creation, for look: “the home of God is among mortals” (Rev. 21:3). What we need is here.

1 The Killers, “Fire and Bone,” track 6 on *Imploding the Mirage*, Sound City, 2020, Spotify.

2 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. J. G. Pilkington (Folio Society, 1993), 1:1.

The homeless fantasy

The most basic human need is for *home*, but our condition in North American technological society is one of *homelessness*. There are many ways this is experienced: the destruction of the natural world and the loss of habitats; the breakdown of rural communities and the disconnection from the land; the loss of cultural belonging and growing individualism; the escape into online bubbles and the Meta-verse. I have no doubt that my generation's struggles with anxiety and depression—42 percent of us have been diagnosed with a mental health condition—are connected with these realities.³

Our technological world of power, speed, and efficiency has been constructed by what I call a “homeless fantasy”: the fantasy that what we need for a better world always lies in some future fashioned from some Ideal. We buy into this and find ourselves rushed and anxious, out of sorts, and *discontent* with ourselves and the world. How can we find our way back home? What we need is here.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives our prodigal technological selves a roadmap back home. Jesus draws a fundamental contrast between two different ways of being in the world. We must choose, Jesus tells us: we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6:24).

The homeless way of Mammon lives in the future, planning to ensure that the vicissitudes of life turn out in ways that keep the cash flowing. The creation, our creaturely bodies, and imperfect communities must be managed and smoothed out to allow for the free flow of production and consumption. This is not the way of Jesus. He calls us to stop living in the future: the present has enough for us (Matt. 6:34).

Look and see. Look at the geese of the air (Matt. 6:26), look at the birch trees, look at the canola of the field (Matt. 6:28)—in turning our grateful attention to the world, we discover the loving care that undergirds it all, and us. Come into the abundance of the present moment: the breath in our lungs, the soil between our bare feet. Here we find that it is as Jesus promised: our heavenly father cares for us. What we need is here.

Jesus tells us “Seek first the kingdom of God”: let go of securing outcomes and instead be faithful right now (Matt. 6:33). We work for a good

3 “State of Gen Z Mental Health,” *Harmony Healthcare IT*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.harmonyhit.com/state-of-gen-z-mental-health/>; “On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults’ Mental Health Challenges,” *Making Caring Common*, 2023, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/on-edge>.

future by caring for the good things of creation and culture that we have in the present.⁴

It is part of our homeless fantasy that words like *health*, *support*, and *care* are seen as the prerogative of experts whose services must be purchased to unlock the benefits.⁵ Or indeed that *politics* has come to signify nothing more than the turning of a vast bureaucratic machine slightly more in the direction of the misfortunate. These words are not abstractions; their meaning is in our hands.

The work of justice does not lie in the hands of the political machine, the experts, or our anxious attempts to control the future. The work of justice lies close at hand: in our homes, neighbourhoods, farms, and backyards. The place that needs care and attentiveness is around us. The truth that needs to be spoken is not to some distant Pharaoh but to the petty tyrants in our own neighbourhood. The support that our neighbour needs is us. The reconciliation that needs to happen lies in plain view. Christ waits in the guise of the stranger.

The work of joy

There is no more urgent task in our technological age than the work of *joy*. In a world obsessed with metrics, achievement, production, and performance, we need to return to the joy of finding our humanity in relationship with others. To find our way home, we must once again make our home in the world, in our own bodies, and with each other. The work of peace is the work of homemaking in a homeless world.

Plant a tree. Make a friend. Invite people over. Make something. Read a book. Cook a meal. Raise your own chickens. Pray. Go barefoot. Gaze at the stars. Think about the meaning of life. Love someone. Take a risk.⁶ What we need is here.

In Homer's ancient epic, *The Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus is trapped, far from his motherland of Ithaca, on the goddess Calypso's Island. The poem emphasizes the resplendence of the Island—there are sights here “to please even a god”—and yet, here in this utopia, Odysseus is withering

4 Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *What are People For?* (North Point, 1990), 178–97.

5 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (Penn State University Press, 2021), 151–70.

6 Julian Waldner, “Gluttony, Fasting and Feasting: Three Approaches to Technology,” *Coffee with Kierkegaard*, August 22, 2023, <https://coffeewithkierkegaard.home.blog/>.

away.⁷ Odysseus is homesick: “he / longs to see even just the smoke that rises / from his own homeland and wants to die.”⁸ The goddess, trying to appease her miserable guest, offers him a choice: Would he like to stay with her and allow her to “set him free from time and death forever”?⁹ Or would he like to return to his wife Penelope, even though “mortals can never rival the immortals in beauty”?¹⁰ Calypso’s argument seems irrefutable, inarguable—who *wouldn’t* choose immortality over finitude and death? And yet, inexplicably, even irrationally, despite her iron-clad logic, Odysseus makes his choice: “*But even so, I want to go back home.*”¹¹ Martha Nusbaum, in her brilliant essay on this story, describes Odysseus’s choice as a choice for the joy of his humanity and the vulnerability, bound- edness, and *fragile beauty* that this entails. He is choosing, in the words of Nusbaum, “the form of a human life and the possibilities of excellence, love, and achievement that inhabit that form.”¹²

The choice expressed here is ours: Will we choose the homeless fantasy of Calypso’s Island? Or will we make the risky and arduous journey to return home to the joy of our humanity?

Finding our way back home

Calypso’s Island represents the fantasy that the limits, burdens, and difficulties of our creaturely life can be overcome—that, as L. M. Sacasas puts it, the crooked timbre of our humanity can be straightened.¹³ It is the fantasy of a world of ever-growing ease and efficiency that sees our creaturehood as an obstacle to this growth. We buy into this fantasy collectively with our capitalist economy of limitless growth, unchecked by human or ecological concerns. We—I—buy into it personally in a myriad of small ways when we choose consumption over repair and contentment; when we choose “fast” meals over home-cooked feasts; or when we choose isolation over neighbourliness.

7 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton, 2018), 5.74.

8 Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.55–59.

9 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.136–37.

10 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.213–14.

11 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.219.

12 Martha Nusbaum, “Transcending Humanity,” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford University Press: 1992), 366.

13 L. M. Sacasas, “Embrace Your Crookedness,” *The Convivial Society* 4, no. 13, July 27, 2023, <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/embrace-your-crookedness>.

This fantasy is expressed in modern-day versions of the Anabaptist fantasy of a community “without spot or wrinkle”—in our modern iterations, we long for a sense of belonging with people who look and sound as much like us as possible. Like Calypso’s offer of a belonging free from the struggle and frustration of real community, our digital tribes offer a polarizing counterfeit of the real thing. However, real community is found not in like-mindedness but in shared weakness.



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This came home to me in a profound way in the fall of 2020 when my father tragically and suddenly passed away in a car accident. I still remember standing shell-shocked with my mother as the police officer gave us her condolences. And then, they came trickling in: friends, relatives, and neighbours. People with tears in their eyes, hugs, and theologically suspect clichés. I still remember the moment when the door burst open, and in came one man with whom I had never seen eye to eye. He didn’t pause. He came straight at me and wrapped me with a hug so tight that I could barely breathe. I glimpsed in that moment what Jayber Crow saw in Wendell Berry’s novel of the same name: a vision of his town, Port William, “imperfect and irresolute,” “always disappointed in itself, and disappointing its members,” and yet, “somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another’s love, compassion, and forgiveness.”¹⁴

How do we find our way back home? What we need is here. The work of peace is the work of joyful homemaking: *Careful* attention to the present. *Faithful* love to the people and places around us—this is what repairs the world (Matt. 6:24–34). In the words of Wendell Berry, “and we pray” not for some other, better world, community, or place but “to be quiet in heart, / and in eye, / clear. What we need is here.”¹⁵

About the author

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¹⁴ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoints, 2000), 205.

¹⁵ Wendell Berry, “Wild Geese,” from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Counterpoints, 1998), 90.