

The Return of the Son
or
What Albert Gilmour Found out about Himself
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*Dying, you destroyed our death.
Rising, you restored our life.
Christ Jesus, come in glory!*

The title of this sermon is “The Return of the Son, or What Albert Gilmour Found out about Himself.”

Albert Gilmour is still alive, I believe; lives in Northern Ireland, and is 75 years old, born in 1944. His age and that year are important for this story.

In 1965 he was 21 years and was about to get married. To get a marriage license he had to produce his birth certificate, and when his parents found it and gave it to him, he noticed something unusual and somewhat disturbing.

The box for “Father’s Name” was blank.

And there was something else even more disturbing.

In the box for “Mother’s Name” was his *older sister’s name*, his sister who was 21 years older than he was.

Can you imagine? First stop: mom and dad, who really turn out to be grandpa and grandma. “Just one question. WHAT?”

Second stop: sis, who turns out to be mom. “I’m so sorry I threw that clock at you. I’m so sorry I cut your hair when you were sleeping. I’m so sorry I told mom and dad—I mean, grandpa and grandma, that you broke the Chinese urn, when it was really me who did it.”

Third stop, your therapist, where you ask, “Is there some kind of ‘All You Can Eat’ plan for therapy, where I could keep coming in?”

And then there was the question of the missing name of the father. Turns out he was Albert Carlow, from Calais, Maine, on the Canadian border, now a small city of 3,000 residents. Ruby, Albert *Junior’s* mother—not his sister any longer—got to know Albert *Senior*, the GI, when he was stationed near her home in Derry. Soon he was sent to join the invasion in Normandy, where she thought he was killed.

Soon, of course, the war was over. And there the matter rested, until the son, Albert Jr, found the birth certificate. But then he let it rest again until 1994, when his daughter, Karen, got involved. She talked to

her grandmother, Ruby, to see if she could remember any clues that might help in the search for her father's biological father and his American relatives.

It turns out that Ruby had *memorized* the address of her GI boyfriend's aunt, 50 years earlier. He had written it on the back of a cigarette package.

From the address, and after a lot of digging, Karen was able to find a phone number, and soon she was talking to her American aunt, her father's half sister. Albert's biological father had died 20 years earlier. Turns out he had *not* been killed at Normandy but had gone back to America.

But despite his death, there were still plenty of living American relatives in Maine—including Albert Junior's biological grandmother. She had faxed a picture of his father to the family in Northern Ireland. And it turns out, he was the spitting image of his American dad.

And the relatives said they would be glad to welcome him if he wanted to visit.

Which he did.

When Albert Jr came to America he said it was like a dream come true—and none of the American relatives could believe how similar he was to Albert Sr—his looks, his mannerisms, in their words—his “whole being.”

His grandmother in Calais, Maine, was in her 90s when they met. On the internet there's a picture of them on a couch, with his arm around her.

And then he went to see his father's grave, and when he wiped the snow away from the grave—and I've told this story just to get to this point--as he said later, “I just felt that weight being lifted off me. I walked away and my life was full then.... There was no more wanting.”

His life was full. The son had returned. The secret was out. The people welcomed him. And there was no more wanting.

It's a parable for the return of Jesus. So we zip backward to the 1st century, to 51 A.D. to be precise, and Paul's letter to a group of people—think of them like the people of Calais, Maine—who were anticipating the return of the Son. They were afraid that Jesus had *already* returned, and that, somehow, they had missed him. They needed from Paul what *we* need—perseverance. They needed what *we* need—comfort. They needed—like *we* do—deliverance from what we might call, “The Endless.”

Depending on what generation you're from, the album called “Endless Summer” is either a collection of hits from 1962 – 1965 by the Beach Boys or the 1994 compilation of Donna Summer's hits, or a 2012 song by the pop group Oceana.

Endless Summer—that sounds grand doesn't it? Every day, swimming in the lake or the river. Hot dogs or hamburgers or ribs every day. Sunshine and parties and good times. But in the summer here in Anacortes, we only get 3 inches of rain in Anacortes. If we had endless summer and month after month only an inch of rain, eventually the land would be parched, the trees would die and Western Washington would look like—Eastern Washington!

Endless is not a good thing. We've got to get past Endless. I can guarantee you that the next 12 election months are going to seem endless. That worrying for your children is endless. That the wait for Jesus to return has seemed endless—the Thessalonians were anxious because 20 *years* had gone by, but we've had 20 *centuries* go by. We've traded away the hope of the return of Christ and gotten in return the conviction that we will need to wait endlessly. And work endlessly. And suffer endlessly. But we are *way* too comfortable with the infinite. The infinite distance between us and the Father. The infinite amount of misery in the world that seems like an enemy we can never defeat. The infinite wait for Jesus to return. If he ever will.

Because we are *sure* that the only things guaranteed are death and taxes. And “the only difference,” said Will Rogers, “is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets.” We are certain of the end of life and the end of resources. And every “now” is just a step from the “no-longer” into the “not-yet” (Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 130). For many of us, life is described by the poet T.S. Eliot, who writes:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

In other words, the end is always near. But it is the end in our time, not the end in *his* time.

The end without an end is frightful. It is an image of our lostness. Like Albert Gilmour before his daughter tracked down the father's relatives in Maine, forever wondering about the father. Forever wondering, worried if people in Maine would like him. Worried because he was born to a single mother.

But to quote Dr. King, “We aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around. We aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. *We are going on.*” It doesn't matter if the dogs are real dogs or spiritual dogs or the dogs of our own emotions. If doesn't matter if the water hoses push us back from doing what we know is hard but what we also know is right; or if the hoses cool us off in the middle of the endless summer day so that we essentially give up waiting for Jesus and enjoy the water and the hot dogs and the day and say, “Yeah, yeah, Christ Jesus, come in glory; we long for your coming in glory.” Maybe we mean “Long? Yeah, it's been a long time that we've been waiting for your coming in glory.”

Today's collect says it all: “Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom....” We are going on.

Or to quote Dr. King again, “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now....”

It doesn't matter because we *know* what Jesus will look like when he comes back. He'll look like that, and that, and that. He will *look* exactly the same because he will *be* exactly the same. And he will *be* exactly the same because he will end the endless, but he will be in his own time. In his *own* time. And in that time, these things—his time on the boat in Galilee, his death, his resurrection—they are not things in the past. They are things in *his* present. What is past is what he dealt with—our sin, our rebellion, our failures. It's the *old* that is past. Sin has been cancelled and death has been vanquished. “Sin and death *did* exist, and the whole of world history... right down to our day, *existed.*” All that is the past. But the present is that

Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father, and that he will return just as he left. The only thing remaining is for the cover to be taken off—hear this language, that the *cover* will be taken off—so that we see the present for what it really is—the dominion of Jesus, the restoring that Jesus has done, the splendor of Jesus.

In the meantime, we have a hard time hearing Paul's comfort to the Thessalonians because we don't believe like the Thessalonians did. We aren't disappointed that Jesus hasn't returned yet because we're not quite sure that he *will* return. There's a blank space on *our* birth certificates in the critical spots and we're embarrassed about it. "Where is he?" The Thessalonians weren't embarrassed about the fact that Jesus hadn't returned yet—they were *heartbroken* about it. They were worried *sick* about it. But Paul comforts them, saying "Do you not remember the things I told you when I was still with you? Did I not say that you had to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught?"

For the Son will return. And the cover will be taken off, and the endless will finally come to an end. And like Albert Gilmour we will say, "I just felt that weight being lifted off me. I walked away and my life was full then.... There was no more wanting."

If you're looking for perseverance.... There's no perseverance in our times except those who know what the world does *not* know, but which the world one day *will* know, namely, that the Son will return. And we, too, will discover something about ourselves. Something marvelous.

It's for those reasons and for no other reasons that we crave the coming again of Jesus Christ. And it's for these reasons that we must let the tiny light shine, which has been given to us.

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Rising, you restored our life.

Christ Jesus, come in glory!