

Lee C. Moorehead

Someone Will be Waiting

I have two very vivid memories from last summer. One is of a ~~bleat~~ Sunday evening in Sydney, Australia, when I was on a train traveling from a suburb into the heart of the city. The train was cold and I was alone. I had been in Australia but a few days and I knew it was going to be many more before I returned home. As the train stopped repeatedly at the different stations my thoughts were with those I loved ten thousand miles away. I began counting the days when I would be back home and I imagined that scene when I would alight from a bus in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and see my family waiting for me. To be sure, about twenty-five days later I did get off a bus in Green Bay late in the evening. The first sight I saw when the bus pulled into the station was of Betty and Tim waiting for me. That was one of the most joyous moments in my life. Have you ever returned from a long trip ~~xxxx~~ to find no one waiting for you? I remember one such occasion. I was making a ~~quick~~ quick landing in Philadelphia so that I could visit my son and his family in New Jersey. When the plane ~~landed~~ <sup>touched down</sup> and I emerged into the lobby no one was waiting for me. It was a thudding disappointment. Looking around I wondered if we had mis-communicated. After several moments he appeared with the explanation that he had remained in his car in the airport parking lot listening to the last moments of an exciting football game. I wanted to be angry but I had to realize that I had done the same thing to others on occasion. But how much it means to have someone waiting for you!

During this past week I have felt this especially because I have been living alone. With Betty visiting our children in the East I have come home late at night to an empty house. Perhaps I have been taking for granted how much it means to me to come home at night to find someone waiting for me. You can be sure that when Betty returns on Wednesday I will be waiting for her at the airport!

The thoughts I want to share with you this morning have been running all week on this kind of a track. I got started on this track several months

ago when I read a beautiful book by a Roman Catholic priest on the faculty of Yale Divinity School. Henri J. Nouwen has written a book primarily for ministers called The Wounded Healer. It addresses itself to ministry in our contemporary society. The author emphasizes the importance of "someone waiting." He writes: "No man can stay alive when nobody is waiting for him. Everyone who returns from a long and difficult trip is looking for someone waiting for him/ at the station or the airport. Everyone wants to tell his story and share his moments of pain and exhilaration with someone who stayed home, waiting for him to come back." (p.66) I have thought so often of that passage. It suggests much about our human lives and what it means to stay alive in this world.

Nouwen does not make the reference, but the great biblical model for this human need is found again in Jesus' parable of the Lost Son. I doubt that anyone has kept a record, but if a record were to be kept I suppose that I return more often to this passage from Luke than any other in the Bible. One never tires of turning that parable around and around, <sup>like a precious jewel,</sup> always catching from it a new gleam of truth. And here again it fits so perfectly: Jesus told about a son who decided that he wanted to leave home, probably hoping to get away from his father's authoritative presence. So he asked for his share of the family inheritance. Reluctantly, and sadly, we might suppose, the father granted his wish. Then the son sauntered off on his merry journey, taking himself to a far country where he proceeded to "live it up" and have a good time. He had an uproariously good time, while his money lasted. But one day he discovered that he had spent his last dime. In order to keep on eating he was forced to take a job slopping pigs for a farmer. The job was so miserable that he groaned every day. But one day he had a sudden thought: the servants working for his father back in his home were so much better off than he. So he decided to pick himself up from this pigpen and go back to his father, making a confession of how stupid and wrong he had been in leaving in the first place. ~~It~~ It was galling to make that journey, but ~~he~~ his footsteps carried him toward home. "But while he was still a long way



off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms round him, and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) Well, that night there was a great party of welcome, with many festivities, just because he had come home. The German theologian and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, in elaborating on this text, called his sermon "The Waiting Father." For that is truly what the parable is all about: the Father who waits for us. Let us explore this on our own this morning, and pushing the story farther discover these four meanings.

-I-

THE FIRST MEANING IS THAT THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL TELLS OF A GOD WHO WAITS FOR OUR RETURN EVEN AFTER WE HAVE REBELLED AGAINST HIM.

That is just what the Prodigal Son did. He rebelled against his Father. He demanded freedom from all control and restraint, and his part of the family fortune. But apparently he was neither ready to cope with that freedom or care for himself when he got mired in the mud. But how he did rebel<sup>0</sup>, and how like that is our own rebellion. People ~~get~~ of all ages get tired <sup>of</sup> restraints and controls. They insist that they can do a better job of running their own lives. So off they go into the wild blue yonder. ~~They~~ This describes adults as well as youth. To be sure, just as I told them last May, a number of the young people who ~~were~~ went through our confirmation class and were confirmed have hardly been back to the church since. The same is true of adults. One man told me that he and his wife were taking a "sabbatical." They just do not now feel the need for this regularity of worship and ritual. So they take off, they rebel<sup>0</sup>. Perhaps they know that the church will be waiting for them when they return.

Everyone is aware that many children these days are running away from home - for all sorts of reasons. But in public places there is posted a toll-free phone number that all runaways may use. If they call home they may learn that someone is waiting for them, if they choose to return. I have always been impressed by the number of rebellious youth who seem not to be able to relate to their parents on a day-to-day basis, but who are always

coming home, if even for only a short time, to get food, clothing repaired and ~~new~~ renewed, perhaps a bit of extra change, and a word of encouragement. I think they keep returning, in the midst of their rebellion, because they know that someone is always waiting for them.

There are not a few children who grow up in homes where they are ~~are~~ well loved and educated, always accepted, really well prepared for life. But then they go out into the world and things don't go right for them. Eventually they make a mess out of their careers or their marriages, and they ask if they can come home. Heartbroken and ashamed, they are able to come home because they know that someone will be waiting for them - someone to give comfort and new hope and set them going again.

Most of us tend to be judgmental, but isn't it striking that when Patty Hearst returned from her bewildering and tragic sojourn, and when David Fine was finally discovered and apprehended, and brought back in chains, their parents were waiting for them. Some of us, lacking the gift of grace, do not know how to understand this. But what do you make of the "Waiting Father" in the story of the Prodigal Son? Can you imagine that salvation would be possible for any rebellious human soul - yes, even you - if there were not someone waiting for him when he returned, or was returned, from his flight?

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ANOTHER IMPORTANT MEANING OF THIS KNOWLEDGE OF "SOMEONE WAITING" MAY BE SEEN IN LIFE'S EMERGENCIES. ALL OF US, JUST BECAUSE WE ARE HUMAN, FIND OURSELVES SOMETIMES IN OUR LIVES UP AGAINST EMERGENCY SITUATIONS. THEN IT IS WE NEED MOST DESPERATELY TO KNOW THAT "SOMEONE IS WAITING."

Not everyone has undergone surgery, but have you ever had the experience of being wheeled back to your hospital room on a stretcher, or of awaking from ~~an~~ anaesthesia, ~~to~~ to find some <sup>loved one</sup> waiting for you in your room? Is that not one of life's more reassuring and thankful moments? Just to return from an emergency, and find someone waiting for you!



During the week just past a great deal happened to one fine young man in our church. On Monday morning Terry Kotas was on his way back to Green Bay, ~~driving~~ driving on a ~~treacherous~~ road made treacherous by winter. Near Chilton, Wisconsin, his auto was struck by a snowplow. Taken to a hospital in Chilton it did not at first appear that he was seriously injured. Then it was discovered that he was bleeding internally. Calls were made to Green Bay and it was determined that he should be brought to Green Bay for surgery. Terry, now recovering from that surgery which saved his life, told me through a heavy tube over his mouth in the intensive care unit at the hospital, what he had learned from that experience. When they put him in an ambulance in Chilton he knew they were bringing him to Green Bay. Along the way he could see the fading twilight of the day just ending. On that journey of some forty miles he began to realize how much caring there was in the world. At his side was a nurse who watched his every move. On the radio in the ambulance he could hear the contacts that were being made for his arrival in Green Bay. He knew that the emergency room was being prepared for him, that nurses and a surgeon would be waiting. But most of all he knew his mother and father would be waiting for him. And sure enough, when the ambulance arrived at the Green Bay Hospital they were all there: the nurses, the surgeon, and his mother and father. Later after surgery, in choked words he spoke to me of all that caring. He said that as a young man he had found many flaws and faults with the Christian faith. He had ~~done~~ <sup>done</sup> his share of criticizing the church. But, he said, "I did not realize that there was so much caring." Then he pointed to the crucifix on the wall in his intensive care room, and he said, "I know this is all because of him."

Well, you might remember that: whenever one of life's emergencies occurs to you - matters not whether it be moral, or professional, or marital, or medical - someone will be waiting for you. You can always call your church and your pastor, and a host of other people will be waiting to help you.

If the Prodigal Son experienced anything it was a dire emergency, and he counted on his father who was waiting for him.

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THERE IS A THIRD MEANING IN THIS STORY.: WE MIGHT VERY WELL THINK OF CHRIST'S CHURCH AS A WAITING PLACE. IN THIS PLACE WE ARE CALLED TO WAIT FOR EACH OTHER, TO STAND BY IN EVERY EVENT OF NEED AND EMERGENCY,, AND MAKE OUR HEARTS OPEN TO EVERY PERSON OF GOD.

Henri Nouwen's book, The Wounded Healer, is all about the ministry of the church. Our ministry to human souls may, therefore, be conceived in making it known that we wait here to attend to the needs of everyone: the sick, the hungry, the dying, the newly born, the newly married, the divorced, the drugged, the lonely, the fearful, the prisoners, and all strangers. Yes, we wait in our church for human needs to be registered on our awareness.

Yes, when someone comes to our community from a distant place, coming as a complete stranger, we ought to make it known that here we await his coming and we will welcome him.

Yes, when someone is hungry or homeless, or lacking in clothing, he ought to be able to come here, knowing that someone will be waiting to help him meet his need.

I will never forget that moment last summer when I landed at the airport in Brisbane, Australia. I knew that I was going to spend the next two weeks in that area, serving in two different churches, but I did not know a living soul by sight. And yet when our party ~~was~~ emerged from the plane and entered the air terminal, there was a mighty crowd waiting for us. In the melee I still felt lost and lonely, for I wondered I would ever be able to make contact with those whom I had come to serve. But suddenly I saw a large red sign held aloft by a tall young man, and on that sign was my name! It said welcome! And underneath that sign was a company of people waiting for me! And I knew that there, ten thousand miles from home, I was being welcomed by the church of Jesus Christ.

Just after Christmas we had a lovely wedding in this sanctuary. Bill Nick and Carol Hamlin were married in a very special service of worship. To another couple that wedding had a special meaning, and they were very much



a part of it. For when over twenty years before Wayne and Gerry Hamlin had brought Carol home from the hospital as a tiny baby, Earle and Ida Swanson were waiting for them on their driveway. They had come to see the baby, to welcome her, and to offer their love and help. And that is the kind of intimacy, a loving relatedness that distinguished the church of Christ.

Henri Nouwen describes the church's function when he writes: "No man can stay alive when nobody is waiting for him . . . A man can keep his sanity and stay alive as long as there is at least one person who is waiting for him." (p.66) Will you from hereafter think of that as a purpose of the church, and will you make yourself such a waiting person for some one's human need?

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JUST ONE OTHER MEANING MUST BE MENTIONED. IT HAS TO DO WITH OUR ULTIMATE CONCERN AS EARTH-BOUND HUMAN SOULS. WOULD WE NOT FEAR TO DIE IF WE COULD NOT BELIEVE THAT SOMEONE WAS WAITING FOR US?

One of the most beloved passages in the New Testament comes from the Gospel of John, and we read it at the burial of our dead. Most of us enjoy the beautiful language of the King James Version: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2) For perhaps a greater clarity of what Jesus meant by those words we can turn to the Revised Standard Version: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" Taking both the sublime poetry of "the many mansions" and the more specific "many rooms" we have here a tremendous statement of faith. If you truly believe in the God of Christ you will be able to trust that on the other side of this earthly <sup>existence</sup> a "mansion" or a "room" just for you is prepared, and that someone will be waiting for you. When a mortal lies at death's mysterious door, is it not a comfort, a hope, to believe, indeed, to know, that someone will be waiting on the other side of what we can presently see?

A man shared with me this week something out of his childhood. He said that as a child he used to lie in his bed, wide awake, in a cold sweat, imagining that there was, after all, utter nothingness. In a ~~terrifying~~ chilling fear I suppose that all of us have felt that about the ends of our lives. We do not know where we came from, or how we got here. And while we are here we do not really understand our lives on earth, for they are bounded by mysteries. But the greatest fear of all is nothingness after our deaths. What does it mean to you, then, in the midst of that fear, to hear the declaration of faith: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

In our frightful and frightening age we have been hearing much lately about death and dying. Theologians, pastors, physicians, nurses, lawyers and politicians have had to face up to complex issues of death and dying. Perhaps we have become obsessed with death because our technology has made dying such a problem. But in all of this controversy we might ~~hear~~ hear the poignant cry of one man, a man of deep faith. He is Joseph Quinlan, the father of Karen Quinlan who has lain now for months in an insensate coma of death. Putting aside for the moment all of the legal, medical and theological issues, we hear this man begging: "Let us allow Karen to return to her natural state so that we can place her body in the tender loving hands of the Lord." (Christian Century, Jan. 21, 1976, p.45) Despite the controversy surrounding his daughter, here is a devout Roman Catholic who believes that when Karen does die someone will be waiting. Does that sound naive, child-like, too trusting? It is indeed the faith of Christians at their best. Many years ago I heard someone tell of something that had been said by the late Methodist Bishop Francis J. McConnell. Bishop McConnell was one of the greatest intellects ever produced by the Methodist Church. I have in my library a whole shelf of his books in which he pursued and probed the Christian faith. In every respect he was an intellectual. At a crucial moment in my ministerial career he presided over the New Hampshire Conference. It was a time when I was making a momentous decision, and he



counselled me personally. The occasion of which I speak was at a meeting of the Council of Bishops where the recent death of another great Methodist leader, Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes, was being lamented. In the few remarks that Bishop McConnell had to offer he said something like this: "I had been looking forward to seeing Ed again. I had something I wanted so to discuss with him. But it will keep." Bishop McConnell apparently died in the faith that someone would be waiting.

Well, at every stage of our lives it is that faith which sustains us. When we rebel we find that we can go home again. When we get into dire emergencies we find that someone awaits us. When we truly experience the church of Christ, the koinonia, we discover that someone waits to help us with our needs. In all of these ~~we~~ our lives are brightened by the image, and the reality, of the Waiting Father. And when we come to die, we hear him who has given us the best Way and Truth and Life that we know, saying to us, "In my Father's house are many mansions, indeed many rooms, with a room for you; if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" Yes, I am telling you: Someone will be waiting for you.