

Back in 1996 at the request of several of our members, we had a parish trip to the Holy Land. I wasn't exactly kicking and screaming, but it wasn't a place I particularly wanted to visit. I'd heard all the horror stories of commercialization and tacky guides that basically left me with no desire to make the journey. Well, we went with 2 dozen folks for what became for all of us a life changing experience. My good friend Curt Kelly said it best. "This isn't a trip; it isn't a journey; it is a pilgrimage." And as we visited all the holy sites and shared the historic moments at Yad Vashem and Masada, we began a ministry that took off across Asia and Europe over the next dozen years. We subsequently went to Turkey and Greece to follow the growth of the early church. Two years after that we traveled to Italy and Switzerland continuing that journey. Then 2 years later, up into Lutherland in Germany and to Austria. And finally we traveled to England, Scotland and Ireland in 2005 to see and learn more of the church of the Reformation. And along the way there were so many learning moments, so many special times of worship, faith and fellowship.

One of the special moments we had in Ireland was when we were in Dublin and saw the President's home there in its beautiful park like setting. And in a center window there burned a candle which President Mary Robinson lit as one of her first acts as the first female president of Ireland in 1990. She lit the candle, our guide explained, to light the way home for all the Irish emigrants, the young people, who left home in the second half of the 20th century as their economy was in tatters. As the economy rebounded President Robinson constantly invited her people to come home...telling them that the light would be on waiting for them...as it was 15 years later when we visited. What a great image.

When we came home, Carol and I were profoundly moved by that symbol and she put a candle in our front window as a reminder of all of our young people who are away from home engaged in war. It is a reminder of our prayers for them and for all people...that these wars might end quickly and that our young people might come home safely. That symbol took on special meaning for our family as my one nephew graduated from the Naval Academy and as the other has been in and out of the war zone. And now once again, for this Family of Faith as Joe Ellis moves to his deployment. The lights are on as we wait for our folks to come home.

Whenever I read our Gospel lesson for today I think of that imagery. Popularly known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, it is anything but. This is the parable of the Faithful Father. This is the parable of the Persistent Parent. Luke's language is powerful. The father runs down the road to embrace and greet his son. The boy doesn't need long apologies. The boy doesn't need explanations. The boy is simply surrounded by the grace and the love of a waiting, patient parent.

I need that image. I need that reminder. For all the times I roam and wander. For all the times I spend God's goods in dissolute living. For all the times I ignore the sacrifice of Good Friday and miss the hope and promise of Easter. Today's Gospel is a reminder that God is constantly waiting for us...to come home.

There are powerful words in our next hymn. It is the story of this parable. It is the prayer to God, to "stretch out his hand in blessing, in pardon and in peace."