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## *Canoe Bobbing and Homecoming*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Proper 14 – Year A**

*“This is the story of the family of Jacob.” - Genesis 37:2*

Canoe bobbing. The story of my family involves canoe bobbing. Every summer my family returns to the same place, a place where I grew up, a place where I see extended family members who I do not see at all during the regular year. It is a lake in Ontario, Canada.

The time there teaches me a lot about families; but, today, I remember a particular game there which has taught me much about family life. It is a game we played with canoes, when I was much smaller. We called it bobbing canoes.

Here is what we did. Two people would get into a canoe, without paddles, go out into open water, and then stand up on either end of the canoe. I don't mean stand inside the canoe, but stand on top of either end, on the gunwales and the little triangular deck plate. Many of you surely realize that this is a highly unstable place to stand!

But we would balance there, and then bob the canoe up and down, back and forth. Yes, it was probably not good for the canoe, especially the old wooden ones; but we were not that heavy back then. Up and down, coordinating our pushes, like a slow trampoline, balancing – and dancing, really.

And then the game began. The game was to try to swerve or jerk the canoe in such a way that your partner would fall. Little tweaks at first carefully, so that I did not fall off, too – but then the leg jabs and lunges would get stronger – until finally my partner would fall flailing into the water.

However, here's the thing. As we got better at falling into the water, we learned how to give our end of the canoe one last kick and make the other person fall into the water as we were falling. In fact, it soon became the case, that both of us—unfailingly—would fall into the water if we tried to kick the other person off. Inevitably, both partners fell into the water.

Yes, that lake—and that game—bobbing canoes—taught me a lot about family life, and any life of relationships. Bobbing canoes taught me that when we throw people off the boat, we end up getting thrown off the boat, too. When we throw people into the water, we end up getting thrown into the water, too.

That lesson might apply to larger communities than just families.

It sure happened to the biblical character, Joseph, and his brothers. I do not know how that family got so crossways and uncoordinated, but they sure did. The brothers of Joseph really seemed to hate him. Maybe it was because he was a tattletale. Maybe it was because he was his father's favorite. How do those kinds of things happen, anyway? Maybe it was because he spent his time dreaming, being lost, and they wanted him to do more work. Maybe it was because he considered himself greater than they were. Why do people behave that way, anyway?

So they threw him off the boat. They abandoned him and left him for dead. Most of us remember what happened then, and years later. Joseph was rescued that day by the Midians, then sold to the Ishmaelites, both of which tribes he and the

Hebrews often considered enemies. Then, after long years, the brothers of Joseph did succumb to loss and famine, while Joseph became great in a distant country. The brothers had to come begging to Joseph to be let back on the boat, to be given food to live on. And, more importantly, Joseph would later forgive his brothers for their violent act.

When I was bobbing canoes as a child, in a place I still call home, I almost always fell off. When we grow up in families, in places we call home, we almost always fall down somewhere. Nations themselves, which we call home, can grow strong and then they can grow weak.

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we call this day, “Homecoming Sunday,” because many of our programs have taken a summer break. Many of us have also been away from home. When the Cathedral staff has considered what to call this day in mid-August, when schools have resumed and our own programs are resuming, we always return to the name, “Homecoming Sunday.”

So, what is “Home?”

Maybe “Home” is that place where we fall out, and then we get back in. Remember, despite our pleasant memories of what home is, homes—families—are also difficult. Home is where families sometimes do throw us off the boat.

“Home” can be a complicated place. Some of us may think we have pleasant memories of home, but others of us do not. Why would Joseph, for instance, ever have wanted to go back home, to where his brothers had abused him? Would someone call his family a “biblical example” of happy family life?

Yet, “Home” is also where families pull each other back out of the water. Remember, there were two brothers of Joseph, Reuben and Judah, who persuaded the other brothers not to do more harm to poor young Joseph.

So, here at the Cathedral, we do something else on this “Homecoming Sunday.” We baptize people. We plunge people into the water, and we pull them back out. This little font does not give us enough room to fully immerse people into the water, but we would if we could.

Because baptism shows us what true “home” is. Home is where we fall in the water. Home is where we get wet and sloppy and messy. Home is where our family members, our community, bob us up and down on canoes. We are dancing elegantly one moment, and then being thrown off crazily the next moment. Home is where we fall off.

And home is where, when we fall off, our loved ones fall off, too. Yes, when we fall off, our partners and loved ones fall off, too. We all do. Home is where we have the courage to bounce around, up and down, back and forth.

Furthermore, home is also where we have the courage to step deliberately out of the boat, and try to walk on the water, like Peter did. Home is where Jesus fully knows that we will get wet. We will sink. Home is where Jesus lifts us up out of the water. Home is where we lift each other up out of the water.

This beautiful baptism ritual symbolizes all of that. We will deliberately plunge these children into the water. (Again, we don’t often plunge them in, but that symbolism is the best; immersion is the ideal baptismal symbol.) But we pull them out, too. And, when we do pull them out, and when we do dry them off, it is not us who is doing that.

It is our holy God, the one who teaches us about death and resurrection, old life and new life. It is our holy God who is pulling us out. It is Jesus who is catching us as we sink. Sometimes we might not think it is God. God might look like Reuben and Judah, the (relatively) compassionate brothers. God might be a Midianite or Ishmaelite, who we thought was the enemy. God might look like a godparent or a friend.

Whoever the person is, God saves us through community. God pulls us up out of the water through other people, our community, our family, our home. When we have bobbed on lots of canoes together, we call that place home. When we have danced on boats, and tried to walk on water, and sunk into the deep together, we call that place home. When we have fallen out many times, and then gotten back in, we call that place home.

Today, we remember all this in baptism, the great symbol of death and resurrection. Welcome home!

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