

A Homecoming Story

Luke 15: 11-32 (from *The Message* – printed at the end of the sermon)

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This parable told by Jesus is one of the basic Bible stories. It is a parable to help people understand who God is and what kind of God. It is a story about what does it mean to feel lost and be found and when we come home to God, we welcome there.

One important thing about parables is it gives us a chance to put ourselves in the story. As you listened, think about putting yourself in the place of the younger son – wanting freedom, rebellious, self-centered. Or the older son – responsible, do the expected thing, but also resentful and bitter. Or the father – loving, willing to allow his children to be who they are, welcoming. It is a story about a real family.

Another thing about parables is that Jesus would tell them and people assumed it would fit their expectations about how life is. But parables turn our expectations upside down. The end of the story does not fit our human terms of fairness or expected outcome. One friend was telling me that she was sitting in church one day with her son. The pastor was retelling this parable. When he got to the part when the son is going home and father sees him coming down the road, the pastor asked, “And what do you think the father said to the son?” My friend’s son leaned over to her and said, “You’re grounded!” Now that is the expected outcome of the story!

The parable of the prodigal son is the last of three parables in Luke 15 that Jesus tells about the nature of God. God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness and goes out looking for the one who is lost. And when he finds the lost sheep, the shepherd celebrates. God is like a woman who diligently searches her house for a lost coin. When she finds it, she calls the neighbors to celebrate. God is like a father who runs out to meet a lost son and then throws a party.

At the beginning of the parable, the younger son says, in essence, “Dad, I wish you were dead. Give me my share of the inheritance that I’m going to get when you’re gone.” He shows his father no respect, and simply demands what he believes he deserves. When he receives it, he blows it all. When he hits bottom, he rehearses a speech to plead with his father to come back home.

Meanwhile, later on, the older brother sits out in the family field, his arms crossed. He refuses to reconcile when his brother returns. He has no joy that his brother is home safe and sound. Instead he complains to their father about “that son of yours.” He will not budge.

The thing we tend to remember most about our parable for today is the lost son who leaves home and the comes back. That is often the focus of preachers and teachers of this text. But Jesus is pretty clear that the main character is the father. He begins the parable by saying, "There was a man who had two sons..." And yet we usually call it The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The focus on the younger son in this parable has also shaped our thinking about the word 'prodigal.' Based on this parable, in my mind, prodigal means wayward, wandering, lost. But I looked up prodigal in Webster's unabridged online dictionary and these were the definitions I encountered:

Prodigal : (1) recklessly extravagant; (2) characterized by wasteful expenditure: lavish; (3) yielding abundantly: luxuriant.

I'm confused here. The dictionary definition does describe the young son's reckless and wasteful actions, but these words also describe the father. So I would like to offer a new title for this parable: The Prodigal Father.

Why? Because the Father is

- extravagant in his forgiveness and welcome of his younger son,
- lavish with rejoicing over the return of one son,
- luxuriant with love for both sons.

That is how the father acts in the story of Jesus. It's really a story about him. "There was a man who had two sons..." and he is excessively gracious toward each one. He goes out to each son. Unlike any other father in the first century Palestinian world, this father leaves the seat of power and runs to embrace the returning younger son. That's not how it normally worked back then; you go all the way to your father. You never expect him to come toward you. In a shame-based village culture, that father runs to welcome his boy, thus signaling to the whole village, "Hands off, he is all mine, and I refuse to punish him since he is returning home to me." He cuts off the son's well-polished apology speech and cries out, "Bring him a princely robe and my signet ring. Call the caterers and hire the DJ. It is time for a party!"

Likewise, the father goes out to the older son. He knows it cannot truly be a big BBQ bash unless everybody is part of the celebrating. He means what he says. "All that I have is yours. Everything that is mine belongs to you as well - even that crazy brother of yours who just returned home. He is your brother too."

Neither one of those young men did anything to deserve such treatment. That is the definition of grace: it is transforming love that we cannot earn. Yet it comes anyway. Grace is always a gift offered. It comes toward us from a God who moves beyond any system of punishment or

reward. Grace comes in complete goodness, for the purpose of creating joy, to the end that all people love one another.

Renown author and Jesuit priest Henri Nouwen studied the parable of the prodigal for three years. His guide into the spiritual lessons of this parable was the famous painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by the Rembrandt. Nouwen also studied the life of the artist that produced this painting. Rembrandt himself had lived the lives of the younger rebellious son, the resentful older brother, and the aged, wise father. He painted this parable with himself as the younger son. 30 years later he painted the story of the return of the prodigal son, and use his own face for the father. (1)

There is a mysterious light engulfing the father and son. The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them, all the light is concentrated. Standing on the right is the elder son.

The painting represents the spiritual homecoming.

As I reflected on this parable this week, I kept thinking about the words *home* and *coming home* and *welcome home* as they related to our current context in June 2020.

Many people have been sheltering in place at home because of Covid 19 virus. I think about those for whom this has been challenging. Unhoused people. People who had to work in hospitals, emergency services, grocery stores, delivery. People who have lost their jobs and income. Paying rent or a mortgage is now very difficult. Being at home is not a given for everyone.

Being welcomed at home is not a given. June is LGBTQ Pride month. I am grateful for all my lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer friends and colleagues. As a pastor I know some of them have been lovingly welcomed and celebrated in their families and homes. And yet so many were rejected, told to leave, told to never come back home. And I know some LGBTQ people of faith were and are warmly welcomed and loved and embraced into their churches and communities of faith. And yet for decades, hundreds of years, most were told they were no longer welcome in their spiritual homes. They were told that God hated them. That was wrong. God loves each person. God loves who you love. FPCSR is a More Light congregation in the Presbyterian household and continues to seek to be a welcoming spiritual home for all people. Welcome home.

Being safe at home. Are black people safe in their hometown or home when there are police officers who too often use excessive force or violence? I have been thinking about the protests these past two weeks after the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. I find myself weeping with black mothers and fathers who grieve the death of their sons and daughters killed by police. Those loved ones who will not come home. This is not

the kind of society we want to live in. I continue to work on my own white privilege, the reality of racism, and what it means that I feel safe around police in my hometown when others do not.

Forced to leave one's home. When black people were taken from their homes and villages in Africa to be enslaved by whites in Europe and North America starting around 1640, a horrific systemic crime was set in motion. The repercussions continue today. As I thought about this parable and the past few weeks, I was reminded of a few white men who finally saw the injustice of slavery, whose hearts and minds were changed and who worked to change the system. One of them was John Newton.

He was lost but did not know it for many years. Newton grew up in England and was part of the shipping business of his father that kidnapped and shipped African men, women and children to Europe as slaves. After years of being in the business of the slave trade, he had an awakening in the midst of a storm at sea. He had a conversion experience and slowly began a transformation. After leaving the sea for an office job in 1755, Newton held Bible studies in his Liverpool home. He became increasingly revolted by the slave trade and his role in it. He quit, was ordained into the Anglican ministry, and in 1764 took a parish.

In 1769, Newton began a Thursday evening prayer service. For almost every week's service, he wrote a hymn to be sung to a familiar tune. One of them was "Amazing Grace." Then in 1787 Newton wrote an essay "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade" to help William Wilberforce's campaign to end the practice—"a business at which my heart now shudders," he wrote. He realized his attitudes, his practices and his disregard for much of the human race because of their skin color was evil and sinful. He repented and believed God called him to changing the laws and attitudes of people.

Amazing grace,.... I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see

God finds the lost. God can open our hearts and eyes. God welcomes you home. The Spirit can change us so we understand and can stand with others who may not have a voice. The Spirit may show us we have a voice and we are beloved. May we be transformed by that unconditional, prodigal, abundant love and amazing grace. Amen.

1) Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., May 1992.

Luke 15: 11-32 from The Message

Then Jesus said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’”

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’”

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

“All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’”

“The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’”

“His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”