

“Going Home”

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Luke 15: 1-9

March 14, 2010

Novelist Tom Wolfe has often been quoted for making the statement, “You can’t go home again.”

Perhaps you’ve experienced that, too.

Have you ever gone back to your childhood home? And that house that seemed so big when you were four years old now seems so, so tiny? And the yard—that enormous yard—now it’s the size of a postage stamp? And the house is a different color now. And the people who live there—well, you don’t know them at all. And you’re not the same, either—not the same person you were when you lived there as a child.

Everything has changed. There’s a lot of truth in Wolfe’s observation: “You can’t go home again.”

That’s what the younger son in the scripture today thought, too.

Here in this story is a human being like you and me, a common and ordinary person who wanted his independence. Who wanted his freedom. Who wanted to do what he wanted to do and not to have to listen to his father and older brother tell him what is right and wrong anymore. He didn’t want to live in the father’s house; he didn’t want to live in the father’s love. He wanted to go out and make it on his own, using his father’s inheritance.

He had done the unthinkable in the culture of Jesus’ day. He had brazenly asked for his share of the inheritance before his father died. And, in spite of the inappropriateness of the request, the father granted it, giving his son what he had asked for. And then the son took what Dad had given him and left home. He squandered his money wastefully, living only for the moment, with no thought to the future, no thought that his money might actually run out.

But it did run out. And then there was a famine. He got a job—a demeaning job for a Jew, feeding pigs. But he was hungry—so hungry; he would have eaten the pigs’ leftovers.

He’s desperate. He’s desperate, and he hatches another plan to take care of himself.

He believes he can’t go home again—at least not as a son. But maybe his father will give him a job as a hired hand; at least then he’ll have a way of supporting himself! So he heads down the long road toward his father’s house. When he gets there, he plans to plead with his father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of the hired hands.”

Now, all this time the father had been waiting. As much as he hurt, he wanted his child back home. Every day, several times a day, Dad would step out on the porch, eyes shaded against the sun, and look off into the distance, hoping against hope to see some sign of his son. He cried a million tears, figured his son must be dead, and wouldn’t eat or sleep for days on end—that’s how much he missed the boy.

One day, as the old man gazed into the distance from his porch, he saw something. It was a male figure, off in the distance, coming down the road. He was about the height of his son, but only skin and bones. The man was walking slowly, his head bowed in defeat and humiliation, each step a chore, toward the father’s house. And as

the figure came closer, the father knew. It was his son! It was his long-awaited, long lost son! His boy had come home!

And Dad couldn't wait! Moved by compassion and love, unable to contain his joy, he RAN out to the road, threw his arms around his son, tears flowing, and embraced him!

The son—hungry, tired, and desperate—began his well-rehearsed speech. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

He had planned another line, of course—a plea that the older man would take him back as a hired hand—but before he could blurt it out, the father gave rapid-fire instructions to his servants, “Quick, now! Bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet—no bare feet, like a slave, for my boy! And kill the fatted calf. We’re going to have a party to celebrate my son’s return!”

You see, the father had a different idea than his son. He figured the boy could come home again—home again, not as a hired hand, but as a beloved son.

Now that’s not necessarily fair, is it? No penalty, no probation, not even a *scolding* when the offender returns home. Just a party thrown in honor of the wayward one who has returned!

It’s not *fair!*

Especially to the older brother in the story. *He’s* the one who’d stayed home with Dad. *He’s* the one who had worked hard—like a slave in his father’s house—while the younger one was off wasting the money Dad had given him. The older son was the *good* child, and dad had never even roasted a *goat* for him! We can understand his resentment, can’t we, when he comes in from the field, hears music and laughter, asks what’s going on, and learns that the younger son—he can’t even call him “brother”—has come home! We can understand how he would say to his father, “I feel like a slave in your house!” and describe his brother as “that son of *yours*.”

We can understand that. Maybe we’ve even been in his place, resenting the treatment someone else has gotten. We’ve worked hard for a long time—and someone new comes along and gets lots of attention and a warm welcome. We’ve slaved in the father’s house, and a wayward one comes back, and the next thing you know there’s a great celebration going on, when all we’ve gotten, *maybe*, is a pat on the back.

What’s fair about *that*?

The father has a response to that, doesn’t he? He reminds the older son, “You are *always* my son! There’s *always* a home for you here! Everything I have—all this mercy, all this joy, all this love, all this forgiveness—it’s all *for you*, my son, my daughter!”

That’s just like God.

With God, we always have a home. We can go home again! With God, there is a standing invitation to those who have wandered away: “Come home!” With God, there is forgiveness and welcome and divine joy for those who have left, who have discovered the emptiness of life without God, and who want to come back. And there’s no probation to be worked off, no time served as a hired hand necessary, before one can again be called “daughter” or “son” of God.

The younger son wandered from home by leaving. But the older son had left home, too—hadn’t he?—without even leaving the household. He thought he had to *earn* his father’s favor. He labored grudgingly, with

resentment. He lived with bitterness against his brother—such bitterness that he couldn't even *call* him his brother! His father's love was there for him, in abundance, and what did the older son do? He pushed that love away!

And what does the father do? Well, he comes searching for him - offering him all that he has. I often wonder what would have happened if that younger brother would have been coming home, coming closer to the father's house - and what would have happened if he would *not* meet the father first but the older brother? What do you think would have happened to the younger if he had been first met by his older brother? Do you think he would have made it into the father's house? I wonder.

The elder brother - there is something missing in this good man is there not?

Something that makes a person want to grieve over him.

He is so without joy that he resents the joy of his Father over the rebirth of his younger brother, and resents the love that this brother is shown, and, as it turns out, he even he resents the work that he does for the Father - regarding it as unrewarded slavery rather than his contribution to an estate, indeed a kingdom, that is already his.

Where is the sense that this son could have, the sense of rejoicing and celebration, the sense of joy and happiness over a brother who was lost but now found? Blind but now can see?

Why does the older brother regard himself as a slave rather than a son?

- Why has he not asked his father for a party with his friends?
- Why has he not sung and danced in the aisles long before his brother returned?
- Why is he so without cheer?
- Why is he so serious, so angry?

A wise person once said - "God hides things by putting them before our eyes."

The party we want from our father is here and now, my friends. We are a part of God's family; we live at home, and all that God has made is ours, and all the promises are for us.

Listen to song of the bird in the morning, the wind in the trees, the ocean's roar. Look at tree, a falling leaf, a flower as if for the first time. Is there not something to celebrate in this?

Or are you a person who looks at the rose bush and only notices the thorns? The person who looks at the day and sees only the work in it, and not the times of rest, of fellowship, of eating and sleeping?

The oldest son complained to the father, saying that "his son" was getting things he did not deserve and that he himself was not getting all that he deserved...

Think about it for a minute Wouldn't you say it is true that "People who complain that they do not get all they deserve should congratulate themselves?" Wouldn't you say that they should thank God - as does Newton with the hymn Amazing Grace? We all have been lost and blind and homeless.

We are all in this story, aren't we? We are sometimes the compassionate father, welcoming the wayward. With open arms and open hearts we forgive and bless, reconciling brokenness and bringing love, peace, and joy.

We are also the elder brother - ignoring the blessings all around us. Resentful and full of bitterness. Growing cynical at all the unfairness we perceive and closing ourselves off from love.

And we are the prodigals who take the inheritance that God has given to us. We take the money, the brains, the personality, the health, the resources; we take our God-given inheritance, and we go and live as if God didn't exist or remotely exists. We wander away from God - get too busy. We get wrapped up in the things of this world and we forget God. We waste our energy and resources until nothing is left of us.

But we, too, can come to our senses, and we, too, can come home to God. Back to the warm embrace of home. Thanks be to God.