

Coming Home
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Luke 15: 11-32
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“There was a man who had two sons...” So begins this deceptively simple tale known to history and to popular culture as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. We tend to see this as a charming story of a loving father— a father as ideally loving as we all ought to be; a father who forgives his errant but repentant child, as, we all, ideally should. And, of course, it is about that. But it is much, much more than that.

It is as much about a compassionate father and an angry brother as it is about a prodigal son. Here we have a father who has a son who wants to live it up and another who has a strong sense of duty and obedience that has guided him. Both present challenges in this lost and found story.

The younger son is the one who is most obviously lost. His lostness begins with his refusal to recognize himself for who he really is — his father’s son, a member of his father’s family. He wants to set himself apart, cut himself off completely and depart for the exotic *far country*.

How many of us have done just this — left home for a far country, an alluring new land offering exotic new thrills? A place where no one knows us, where we can get away with stuff we can’t get away with at home? How many of us have taken everything our parents gave us, free of charge, and expended it in a far country on things we can’t have at home? Not all of us, to be sure. But many of us sitting here today are returned prodigals who have spent our time in the far country. We started out in the comfort of home and ended up in the muck of the pigpen. Many of us here began our faith journey as prodigal daughters and sons.

So let’s look at this younger son for a moment longer. It is difficult for us, in our day and age, our morality; with children leaving home for college, for new lives, setting up housekeeping in various far places, for various reasons — it’s difficult for us to appreciate the drastic nature of this prodigal son’s departure. He is bailing on any responsibility to care for his parents in their old age, back in those days before Social Security, hospitals, or retirement homes. Asking his father for his share in the inheritance while his father is still alive, in that place and at that time, was the same as wishing his father to be dead. Moreover, he was relinquishing any future claim to his father’s estate.

In making the choices that he makes, the younger son truly becomes lost, in every sense of the word. He is cutting himself off entirely from everything he knows — family, faith and heritage. In the foreign country, he even cuts all ties to the ethics and way of life of his past.

Well, it sounds like things fell apart pretty quickly. In short order, he spent everything and is reduced to feeding pigs (needless to say, feeding swine was the abomination of abominations in the Jewish culture of the time), and not only feeding them, but reduced to having to eat what they ate. He was in a strange land. No one knew him well, or wanted to. He was out of money and, therefore, out of friends. No one owed him anything, no one gave him anything. Nobody wished him dead, as he had wished his father dead and out of his life. No. No one *cared* one way or the other whether he lived or

died. He was truly lost — as lost as you can get. And then, what happens?

To state it as succinctly as possible, the young man becomes *un-lost*! The first step is coming to the realization that he is indeed lost! In the words of the text, he “came to himself.” He came to realize just who he was, and who he was not. He reclaimed his identity as his father’s son, a citizen not of this illusory far country, but of his father’s household. In one commentator’s words, he “affirms the human capacity to renounce foolish error and reclaim one’s heritage and potential.”

The young man, up to his neck in the muck of the pigpen, comes to himself. Then, after coming to himself, after reclaiming his identity, he decides to do something about it. He decides that he will arise and *go*. He will return to his home, go back to his father, back to his mother, back to the parents who love him unconditionally.

This might be you today. Maybe you are feeling lost and need to come to yourself. You might have taken a wrong turn and feel that no one cares about you today. Maybe you need to remember that you are a precious part of God’s family. Know that you, too, can arise and go home.

We all know the rest of the story, but let me highlight some of the details. His father is described as peering down the road, anxiously hoping for his son’s return. When he sees him coming from way far away, the father leaps to his feet and goes running to meet him. In ancient Palestine, it was regarded as unbecoming — a loss of dignity even — for a grown man to run, and yet, run he does. This father — who, as many think, is a stand-in for God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth — leaps to his feet, hikes up his robe and goes *running* to meet his returning son. Picture it!

This is how God welcomes those who come back. Even those we might just love to call jerks and other choice names! The smell of the pigs and the muck of the pen are still hanging off of this prodigal son, and the father goes running to meet him. He hugs him. He kisses him. The son was given a robe to signify an honored person, a ring to mark his authority, and sandals for his feet to mark him as a son and not a slave or servant. The father doesn’t even give him a chance to recite the speech of apology that he has prepared for him. “My son who was lost is found! Get him cleaned up and dressed up! Stop working! Stop everything! We’re having a party!”

This is how it is, when the lost return to God. But wait a minute. The story doesn’t end there. There’s another character waiting in the wings.

Ah, yes! Another character! He’s as much of a *character* as the prodigal. He is the elder son.

If you never were a prodigal, there’s a good chance that there’s an elder brother lurking in you somewhere. In the story, he’s out tending his father’s sheep, and he hears, in the distance, the noise of the party. He goes in, asks a slave what’s going on.

“Your lost brother has returned,” the slave says, “and your father has thrown a party.”

And this elder brother stays outside and pouts. He fumes! *This brat, this spoiled brat! He’s off doing whatever pleases him, while, I’m here breaking my back to keep this farm running! I do all the work, he goes off and plays and now he wants back again and, and* “You killed the fatted calf for him!” he yells

at his father.

We can just feel that seething bitterness, can't we? We can feel it, and it is a familiar feeling. Oh, no. We have played this role, too.

Look at those people over there—getting all the money, all the credit! You've been good, you've followed the rules, you've paid your dues. And the others get the money and privileges? Are you kidding me?

Yeah, we know this guy way too well, don't we? But that bitterness and pouting gets us nowhere.

"All that I have is yours," says the father. Receive it. Open your heart and receive it. It is there for you and always has been." My love is abundant.

Yes, there are three main characters in this story and we can all identify with one of them. Many of us can identify with the younger brother. Many of us can identify with the older brother. Most of us can identify with both.

Maybe we are the father. Or can be the father, because this kind of compassion and forgiveness is just what this world needs. We have probably been on the receiving end of that kind of love and forgiveness. We can extend it to others as well.

God continues to invite us to come home with the familiarity and comfortableness with which a child runs into the arms of a loving parent. But it also means that God accepts the possibility of pain if the child runs the other way. As the parable suggests, we are not forced to stay. We can go if we insist, and there is risk that we may never return. But as the parable also suggests, God is always on the lookout for us to return home, holding a warm spot in his heart for us, and keeping the makings of a welcome-home party at the ready. God's forgiving love embraces everyone. The youngest, the oldest, the wanderers, the dutiful, the lost and the found. All are offered a welcome that can make everything new.

ALL of us need to come home. We need to claim the identity God has for us. We can be like the father in this story. Our prodigal sisters, our prodigal brothers are out there on the road home. Let's get up and run to meet them. Maybe we could even have a party waiting for them.

After this father runs to his returning son, he embraces him and kisses him. Next, when the son tries to stammer out an apology, the father doesn't even let him finish it. And then, the father instructs his servants to prepare a celebratory feast.

All three of these actions are significant, and they are reflected in a nationwide poll from a few years ago that asked, "What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?" Here's what the survey revealed:

The first was, "I love you."

The second was, "You are forgiven."

And the third was, "Supper's ready."

This father in the parable had lived with the fear that he'd never get the chance to say those things to his wayward son. But when the boy came home, the father, by kissing his son, shushing the apology and ordering a feast, effectively said all three of these phrases to the prodigal.

God watches down the road, waiting for us to turn toward home, so God too, can say all three to us. "I love you. You are forgiven. Supper's ready."