

Homecomings

Luke 15:11-32

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This story in the gospel of Luke, the story of the son who spurns his father, runs away and wastes his inheritance, and then comes home hoping against hope that he can at least find a place in his father's house as a servant, this story has a lot that can go wrong. Bruce Springsteen wrote a song called, "My Father's House." It is a song about a relationship between a son and his father that has been a struggle. In the song he dreams about the hard things that pulled them apart. In the dream he reconnects with his father, he makes his way to his father's house, he sees his father, and he falls shaking into his father's arms. When he awakens from this hopeful dream he gets dressed and makes his way to his father's house. What he sings about next is heartbreaking. "I walked up the steps and stood on the porch. A woman I didn't recognize came and spoke to me through a chained door. I told her my story and who I'd come for, she said, 'I'm sorry son but no one by that name lives here anymore.'" In the story of the Prodigal Son, a lot could go wrong. The son could make it all the way back to his father's house, and find that the father was no longer there. "I'm sorry son but no one by that name lives here anymore."

Just as heartbreaking would be for the son to return and find the father at home, but to find that the father was not there to welcome him. The father could have slammed the door in his face and rejected him. Around the time Jesus was alive, around the time Jesus was carrying on his ministry of teaching and healing, there was another group of devout believers in the God of Israel who separated from the mainstream religious movement. They were known as the Qumran community. It is from the Qumran community that we have recovered the Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls reveal a community that was very devout, desiring to live pure and holy lives that honored God. In their pursuit of holiness they felt compelled to exclude those that were not pure and holy.

Qumran had priests. But if the priest had a blemish, or was blind or lame, that priest could not approach the altar. And the community in general had severe restrictions. These restrictions kept unclean people from fully participating, and sometimes completely cut off their place in the community. If you were unclean, blind, deaf, or lame, you were not welcomed into the community. And you could not enter, you could not belong, you could not participate if you were unclean.¹ When Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, he is under the watchful eye of those who found it very disturbing that Jesus was including ones who should not be included. Think of his ministry. He healed the lame, the blind, the deaf, and the leper. He made friends with tax collectors

¹ Bertil Gartner, *The Temple and Community in Qumran and New Testament*, p.2 ff.

and sinners. He went to parties at their houses. And when he tells this parable about the Prodigal Son, the son is the epitome of one who is unclean. He has been touching and handling, feeding and wallowing with pigs, the very essence of something unclean for an Israelite. It is this Prodigal Son, with all his baggage and uncleanness who comes back to the father's house. This story could have gone wrong because the father could have seen him and immediately shut the door and barred him from every returning to the family home.

Thankfully for the Prodigal Son, the story does not go wrong. Thankfully for us, the story of the Prodigal Son does not go wrong. When he makes his disgraced return, the father is home. Not only is the father home, he is waiting and watching. You even get the sense he is longing to catch a glimpse of the wandering son, hoping against hope that the son might make his way back home. It turns out the father is home, and the father wants nothing more than to welcome back his son, not as a servant, but as a beloved child. There is no lecture. There is no demand of an apology. There is no stern rebuke. There is no judgment. There is no timeout. There is no penance. In fact, there is no patience with the son who tries to explain and make things right. All this father wants to do is hug, embrace, adorn with a robe, bless with a ring, and feast with a fatted calf. All this father wants to do is love his son and welcome him home. Let us rejoice in the declaration of the father. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The good news of the Prodigal Son story is that the father is home and the father is there to welcome the son back home. But what about the presence of the older brother? Is it good news that the older brother is also at home? Is it bad news that the older brother is at home? The older brother certainly does not share with the father in the rejoicing of the return of the younger brother. Jesus tells us the older brother is angry. He tells us the older brother refuses to join in the celebration. Jesus tells us the older brother seems bitter that the big party being held for the younger brother is a party the father never threw for him, who had been at home all those years "slaving" and never "disobeying". We get the sense if the older brother was the one in charge of welcoming the younger brother home, it would have been anything but a warm welcome, and nothing close to a celebration. "Look what you did, you made a mess of things, you are filthy, you blew it, you literally stink, you are a disappointment, you are a failure, you don't deserve to be called a son anymore." Is it good news or bad news that the older brother is at home?

Because the story of the Prodigal Son is a parable, we have a unique opportunity to explore that very question. And knowing that within this church, as within any church, there are older brothers and sisters, ones who have really been pretty faithful and obedient throughout their lives, it is important that we consider the older brother in this parable. When I say there are ones who have been faithful and obedient, we do not mean any of us, even the model members, have been perfect. But there are ones who

really have always been at home, always a part of the family, always willing to help and serve. Is it good news that older brothers and older sisters are part of this story, this parable?

The answer would seem to be no, that it is not good news if the older brothers and older sisters have the attitude of judgment and condemnation that marked the older brother in the parable. If those who have been at home all these years look at the ones coming home to the gracious love of the kind and caring father with disdain, with jealousy, with anger, then it isn't really good news that the older ones are at home. And if the church presents itself as a community of older brothers and sisters who are angry at those who receive God's free gift of grace, then that wouldn't be much of a church, would it?

But it seems to me that it certainly could be good news that the older brother is at home. It seems to me that the older brother, or the older sister, could see what the father does in terms of welcoming and receiving and rejoicing, and share in that joy. It seems to me that it is not out of the question that an older brother or an older sister would have come to know the heart of the father through all the years of being at home, faithfully serving, faithful giving, faithfully doing, and come to share that same heart with God. It seems to me, because I have known many older brothers and older sisters, who have joined in the rejoicing, who have been there to welcome and receive the prodigals who come home, that older brothers and older sisters can be vital links to ones who come home seeking a chance to start over, to find forgiveness, and to rest in the arms of the father. Instead of beating them up with criticism and berating them for bad choices and failures, they create a safe space for people to come and be enveloped and embraced in the love the father wants so desperately to share with all of his children, the ones who stayed home and the ones who wandered far.

Over the next few weeks our passages of scripture will come from the Apostle Paul, who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Some call Paul the Apostle of Grace. In Ephesians chapter 2 he says it simply, "By grace we have been saved, not by our works. No one should boast." In Romans 5 he writes, "God proves his love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Paul is and was the Apostle of grace. But he wasn't always the Apostle of Grace. There was a time when Paul was convinced he was the perfect older brother. He was born into the right family with the right heritage and he did all the right things....all the right things. He even called himself faultless. And he was not welcoming of any who found salvation through grace. He felt like the house of God was only for those who were born right and lived right and believed right and did right. And if you didn't...

Paul was an older brother who judged and condemned and even persecuted those he felt did not belong in the Father's house...until he met Jesus. When Paul met Jesus, his life changed. He was still an older brother. He still had all the same things he could boast about. But when he met Jesus, he discovered his worth wasn't in being an older brother. His worth was simply in being a child of God. As a child of God, he didn't get what he deserved. He got more than he ever dreamed of. And that is the essence of grace. After Paul met Jesus, he spent the rest of his life doing everything he could to invite people into the Father's house. He wanted every person he met to come home to the Father, to know the love of the Son, and to be filled with presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Here on this Homecoming Sunday, if you call this place your home, whether you came as a younger brother or sister who had really wandered far away and you made your back grateful to be wrapped up in the arms of the loving Father, or if you have been an older sister, an older brother, if you have always made this your home, would you consider how you might use the life you have been given to welcome others. It is not bad news that there is an older brother in the parable. Not if that older brother, or that older sister, has come to realize what a blessing it is to be in the house of God.

On this Homecoming Sunday, I wonder what it might mean for all of us children who are home in the house of God, I wonder what it might look like if we made a commitment to do everything we could to make this a place where others felt the welcome of God, where people felt the embrace of God, where others walked in these doors and said, "This is a place I could call home." If we all made that commitment, not out of duty, but out of a great sense of joy and gratitude, wouldn't it be something. It is an honor to usher, an honor to host coffee fellowship, an honor to bring food for the Warm Shelter or to cook pancakes on a Saturday morning, an honor to do the work of Deacons and Elders and Trustees, an honor to teach Sunday school or come on Friday nights for God's Path Seekers or Tuesday with our youth, an honor to serve on committees, an honor to sing in choir or ring bells, or fold bulletins and stuff newsletters.

You get a sense of what it might look like to be a child of God who knew what a gift it is to be in the Father's house when you read Psalm 84. "How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you." It is that attitude of gratitude and appreciation that lead the psalmist to write, "Better is one day in your courts...(your house)...than thousands elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked." When you know who God the Father is, so full of love, so full of grace, so kind, so compassionate, just to be a part of God's family takes on the deepest meaning. "I would rather be a doorkeeper..." Oh God, just give me something to do, so that I can help others find a home in your house.

It's homecoming Sunday. There is someone home, and his name is God our Father. And he is here to welcome us. If that isn't enough, think about this. The parable of the Prodigal Son doesn't stand alone. It is one of three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15 when he is criticized for being a friend to sinners. He doesn't defend himself. Instead he tells three stories to show us a glimpse of who God truly is. In the Prodigal Son the father waits at home, always ready to welcome the Prodigal who returns. But there is also the parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd who leaves 99 in the fold and searches high and low to find the one lost sheep.

We don't just wait here for people to walk through our doors. Oh yes, that is very important. The welcome, the warmth, the kindness, the concern we show to each person who enters these doors means so much. But we are also given the opportunity to represent Jesus as ones who go out and seek for the lost, the hurting, the lonely. In the parable of the lost sheep Jesus brings the lost sheep home. That doesn't always happen in our case. We might simply be a friend to someone who is hurting. They might not follow us to church. That's okay, isn't it? Isn't it enough simply to share God's love with people who are in need? We go out of this house, the house of the Lord, and we share his love with everyone we meet.

My mom was an incredible woman. She had the kind of heart that welcomed others and made them feel at home. But one of the things I like best about her is that my sister grew up knowing the love of our mother, and because she knew that my mother's heart was open to others, she invited them into our home, the home where my mother shared the love of God with so many. When my mom died, my sister Anne pulled me aside after the memorial service to tell me a story.

She told me of a family friend who came all the way from New Mexico to California to be at my mom's memorial service. This family friend wanted to get up and tell a story at the memorial service, but she didn't get the chance. So she told the story to my sister Anne. Anne and this friend are the same age, and the story took place when they were seniors in high school, more than 40 years ago. This friend had signed up to be in our county beauty pageant, the Miss Kings County Pageant.

When the day of the pageant rolled around, my sister Anne was driving down the street in our small town and she saw this friend walking along. Her friend was crying. Anne pulled over and asked what was going on. Her friend said it was the day of the pageant and her dress was at the dry cleaners, and she didn't have any money to get it out. She said her costume for that night had never been completed. She said she hadn't had anything to eat all day. And I guess behind it all was that our friend's mom had some things going on in her own life that kept her from being there for her daughter. My sister Anne listened to all this and then said to her friend, "Get in the car. I know what to do."

Anne brought her friend to our house, where my mom was. My mom heard the story, and immediately gave Anne money and said, "Go to the cleaner and get the dress." While Anne was at the cleaners, my mom helped our friend fix her costume up. By the time Anne got back from the cleaners our friend was sitting down at our table and eating some warm food. That night our friend made it to the pageant, she had her dress, her costume was all fixed up, and sitting there in the auditorium cheering her on were my mom and my sister Anne.

This friend wanted to share that story at my mom's service. And what she wanted to say at the end might be the best part of it all. She wanted to say, "I live in New Mexico now. And because of that day, and that type of love and welcome, I have found a Presbyterian Church where I am a member, and where I belong." She found a church she could call home.

Tonight is going to be a really special night. Did you know tonight is the Miss America Pageant? Some young woman is going to be crowned Miss America. I'm going to be watching with special interest. That friend who found a home in my mother's house so many years ago...that friend has a daughter. Believe it or not, her daughter was crowned Miss New Mexico, and tonight she competes in the Miss America Pageant. If you listen closely, you might hear some loud cheers going up from our home on 28 Valley Drive in Westerly, Rhode Island. I would love it if Miss New Mexico wore the crown.

But in the scope of things, that doesn't really matter. What really matters is that Miss New Mexico, and her mom who one day was sitting by the side of the road crying, and Prodigal Sons who wasted their inheritance, and older brothers who watched over the shoulder as the loving Father welcomed and received lost children home, and people like you and me, what really matters is that there is a Father in heaven who is home, who is always home, and when his children come home, he is there to welcome them with open arms, with loving arms, with embracing arms. He wipes their tears and crowns them with a glorious crown and calls them my beloved child, and clothes them in garments of righteousness and praise.

I'll hoot and holler at the Miss America Pageant tonight. But my hooting and hollering can't even come close to the rejoicing there is in heaven when one of God's children comes home. It can't come close to the party there is heaven when one sinner repents.

It is Homecoming Sunday. Children of God, come home. Come home. Come home. And let the celebration fill our hearts with love and joy.