

WHERE IS HOME?

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

I know a Chinese doctor who lives in Toronto. Besides her daughter and her, the rest of her family are in China. She says that from the time she came to Canada, she felt deep in her heart that this was home. Every time she visits family back in China, she feels she is away from home. Coming to Canada was like a homecoming for her in some strange yet very profound way.

I think this applies to my family as well, and perhaps to other families who are immigrants also. But some of you who have lived in Canada for several generations don't think of home as simply a country, but also a particular part of the country. It may be some rural part of Ontario, or Quebec, or the Maritimes or out West. I know people who have lived in a particular community all their lives and they know it inside out. For some people home is a piece of land where they have roots that go back generations. I can only imagine how indigenous peoples feel about a land upon which they can trace their roots back for centuries.

Of course, once we talk about indigenous peoples, we are not just talking about land, but culture, language, and traditions too. Home is all of this and it is so hard when home is taken away without your choosing.

For some of us, home is also divided between here and there, between several different places, cultures, and languages also. I think about Ukraine, those fleeing Ukraine, those living here, and how the land, the culture, the language, the traditions, and one's very identity become all that much more critical when threatened so horribly.

Finally, for many of us, home is not just a physical place or a social place. It is also a spiritual place. It is about relationships, about family, about community. For some of you, I hope, church can serve as spiritual home, and this church in particular.

Well, the story in our gospel reading is also a story about home. There is a father and his two sons who are a family. They live on a farm on land which probably goes back generations. But one son leaves home because he can't stand being home any longer. The other son never leaves home. But he is miserable being home. He's not at home mentally and spiritually even though he is home physically.

Do you feel yourself closer to the one son or the other? Or do you see yourself in both in some way? Well, this story is about coming home. The one son comes home after leaving home. The other son never leaves home, but he's never felt at home. Let's explore this story in a little more detail.

Let's begin with the first son, the one who leaves home.

Why does he leave? He wants his freedom, and he wants to determine his own life. The farm is too small for him. He wants to experience the big city. His father is unusually generous. He probably has to mortgage the farm to give his son a full half of its value. He does it regardless

of any misgivings he may have. It seems foolish, doesn't it? The father is gracious and generous to a fault.

The younger son goes to the big city, spends all his money in irresponsible and shady activities. In the end, he's left with nothing. But to survive with nothing, he's got to get money any which way he can. His only option is getting a job feeding pigs. It's humiliating and desperate, but when you've got no choice, you've got no choice. Things get so bad, in fact, that he envies the pigs' life. They eat as much as they want. He can never get enough to satisfy his hunger.

But then, we're told, he comes to his senses. What senses? He remembers his home. Nobody starves in his home, even the most basic of workers. Nobody goes without a roof over their heads, and some dignity and respect. That's surely better than his situation feeding pigs. He's always hungry, has little comfort or security, and he's treated like dirt.

But what must he do to go back home? He must acknowledge how much he's messed up. He must apologize profusely. But even more. He must make his request as minimal as possible. Forget the privileges of being a son any longer. All he would ask for is to be treated like a farm worker. At least he'll get food and shelter, dignity, and respect. The alternative is starvation, humiliation and eventually a cold, lonely death.

But this story really comes alive when the younger son comes within view of his home. We're told his father spots him from far away. Does he get mad? Does he adopt an 'I told you so' approach? Does he set conditions for his son's re-admittance to the household? No, No and No. He responds with his heart, and his heart is full of love and tenderness. He embraces his son and welcomes him back fully with no conditions, no shame, no grovelling. That's what the robe and the ring are all about.

But what about all the money that's gone? What about the disrespectful and even contemptuous treatment of his father? It doesn't matter. It's already been forgiven.

But how can this make any sense? Are there no consequences to people's bad choices, their mistakes, their failures?

Well, the son did suffer consequences. The father's heart is not about adding to those consequences but giving his son the one thing most needful to transform his life. To his son's repentance, he offers heart-felt forgiveness. To his son's effort to claim responsibility, he offers generous love and reconciliation.

But the elder son has issues with all this. He thinks his father is way too easy and way too generous. He also resents the fact that his father loves his brother the way he does. Shouldn't love have conditions? Shouldn't people be punished and disciplined into change? And shouldn't people be made to pay back what they've lost even if they can never do it within their lifetimes? If they can't pay their debt, we shouldn't make it easier for them. We should make them pay for all the suffering and hurt they've caused.

But what does all this reveal about the elder's son way of living his life and doing what he does in relationship to his father? His reason for doing what he does and being who he is, is all about reward and punishment. There is little joy in his life and little love in his heart. He doesn't do

what he does because he finds it meaningful and rewarding in itself. He does it because he will get a reward. He resents his father and never experiences his father's love and generosity. Life is all about duty and necessity and relationships are all about tit for tat. Everything is calculated. The heart has little to do with it.

Of course, the elder son's issues with his father are really his issues with God. The Father in this story reflects God as Jesus understands and embodies God. And the way we see God is connected to the way we relate to others and see life. The two are completely intertwined. Do you experience God as infinitely generous and compassionate with you? Well, maybe you feel you are deserving of God's generosity and blessing, at least more than others. Maybe you feel you've earned some grace with God, or at least you have learned from your mistakes and haven't kept messing up again and again with no sign of recovery. After all, if people are not disciplined and punished, how will they ever learn, if they can ever learn?

But what if we have nothing in ourselves unless it has been made available to us? What if the internal resources that make up our character and the external resources of the people, circumstances and supports in our lives are all given to us beyond anything we could ever do to earn or deserve them? What if even our psychological and spiritual make up that allows us to be strong enough and smart enough to learn and grow and become better are all given to us from beyond us. If we understood life this way and ourselves this way, would it not make a difference how we would see others and how compassionate we would be toward others who just haven't or won't get with the program as we have?

You see, God may judge right from wrong, but God won't judge people as useless, worthless, and failed because they're more in the wrong than the right. Any change that's possible in people can only come when they are loved and loved without conditions. Tough love is not love with conditions. Tough love is love that is committed to someone come hell or high-water, but without making excuses, without papering over the wrong or pretending it's a right when it's not. Tough love is about a commitment to truth, honesty, and high standards, but also a commitment to always extend a hand out to a drowning person even if they're always drowning and never ever learning well how to swim for all our efforts to teach them. To have that kind of steadfast commitment of total love toward us is what the bible describes as God's most central character trait. The biblical word in Hebrew is: *hesed* – steadfast, tough, durable love.

The Greek New Testament word for such love is: *Agape* - a love that forgives wrongs, erases debts, embraces enemies with a hope of reconciliation even when reconciliation is questionable. Jesus also uses another special word for a divine kind of love: *splaxnisthe* – which is more of a feeling word for love, a kind of gut-wrenching compassion for those who suffer regardless of who's to blame.

And that's what saves the younger son. His heart can feel. It's not hardened. He feels repentance from the bottom of his heart, and his repentance meets his father's embracing love which also comes from depths of the heart. Their communion is a communion of the heart. The older son cannot understand such feelings and he resents his father and brother. He doesn't trust them and feels this is manipulation, not sincerity. His brother is getting an easy ride and his father is foolishly naïve.

Moreover, such feelings also open up feelings of resentment and grievance toward his father. His father has made big assumptions imagining his older son and he were on the same page. They're not at all. He feels aggrieved by his father, by life, by his brother, by everything. He hasn't received a fair deal for all his hard work.

My friends, what this parable is pointing to is the downward spiralling effect of a heart that cannot feel steadfast love, forgiving love or empathic love. If we are so hardened inside, we cannot experience the circulation of love flowing into us by God and rising within us in how we relate to others and our world. And this also reveals that we cannot feel true joy, abundance, and peace in life even if we have it all materially, socially, and health-wise. If our heart is closed, all these external blessings can be thrown at us, but they'll just bounce off and we will remain miserable and discontented. We will complain, resent, and envy. We will be cynical of every purported good deed or sentiment, always looking for the flaw and the lie in it all.

According to this parable, all of this is symptomatic of a failure to experience the infinitely rich love of God, rich in spiritual blood cells that can flow into the hurting and dark places within us and begin to heal us from the inside out. Once this begins to happen, even when the outside is not easy or pleasant, the inside works as a counterforce of love that gives us the strength and resilience to face life's challenges with grace, courage, compassion, and humour...

The father, younger son and all the servants were ready to celebrate in a spirit of heart-felt communion. The older son refused to join in, preferring to stew in his misery. Everyone was at fault, including God. He could not find his way home.

What about you and me? Are we on our way home? Have we found home? Are we away from home? Are we shut down from the way back home offered us by a God who is the fullness of love?

Let us pray: Meet us on our journey, O God. Welcome us with open arms... be patient with us as we work through our anger, resentment, or despair... Find us if we are lost right now... flow into us like spiritual oxygen so that we can breathe in your love... In Jesus' name; Amen.