

3-22-20 Sermon “The Way Home”

This coronavirus pandemic has led to our using language we don't usually use, hasn't it? No, I'm not talking about THAT language, I'm talking about terms like “social distancing,” - who knew what that even was two weeks ago? Then there's “containment zones,” “shelter in place,” or “shelter at home.” Some of us are spending more time at home these days than we have in a very long time. For some, when we talk about home we mean a city, a state, maybe a neighborhood. For others, when you talk about home, one particular place, one particular location or house comes to mind. “That,” they would say, “is home.” I counted all the places that I have lived and came up with something like 20 different addresses, 20 different places that for some amount of time, have been where I slept, had my mail delivered, that I called home.

For other people, though, those who don't have a regular roof over their head, those who sleep on the streets, in cars, or who rely on shelters, or on the goodwill of others for a bed, “home” has a completely different meaning. We take for granted, often, the blessing of a physical home that is not available to thousands of people in Central Ohio and millions of people across this richest country in the world.

In our passage from Luke, the younger son has taken for granted, not only home, but family, and tradition, and respect. One of the things we need to explore when reading this passage is the meaning of the word “prodigal.” That word has a two-fold meaning: meaning both “a wasteful expenditure” and being “luxuriant,” so if we think about it, the term “prodigal” could be equally applied to both the son, who is “wasteful,” and to the father, who is “luxuriant” in his acceptance of the

son when he returns. In fact, seeing as how this parable was told by Jesus in a series of parables to describe the nature of God, it has been suggested that this parable could more appropriately be titled “the prodigal God.”

So, the younger son wants to travel the world, maybe start a new life somewhere other than on the farm, and asks his father for his share of the inheritance. Now mind you, this requires more than just writing the kid a check or making a trip to the bank to make a withdrawal - it means selling off half of the livestock and crops in order to give his son this money. Understand, in one sense, he’s basically telling his father, “I wish you were dead.”

Now, you’re probably nicer than I would be in this situation, I’m not sure how generous I’d feel if my child came up to me and said they wished I were dead. Amen? In fact, at that point, I might be inclined to take them out of my will. But that’s just me.

And we know how this story plays out - the son leaves, and in due time squanders all that he was given, finding himself homeless, jobless, and hungry. And it’s then that he has this “aha” moment, if you will, when he realizes that his father’s servants live better than he does, and while he can’t expect to return with the rights of a son, perhaps his father will take him on as a servant and he’ll have a bed, a roof over his head, and some food.

And so, what does he do? He turns for home. Now, we have a lot of ideas and ideals about what home means, there are a lot of pithy little sayings about “home” that saturate our culture. “Home is where the heart is,” we cross stitch onto pillows. Or there’s “Home Sweet Home.”

With Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, we can click our heels together and say “There’s no place like home.” But there’s also “You can’t go home again,” which seems counter to the first one and, perhaps, most relevant to our message from Jesus as well.

In our film, “The Way,” the son Daniel is kind of a prodigal son in the eyes of his father isn’t he? He’s walking away from his responsibilities, leaving behind his father, and going off to just wander on his own, to find himself. At least that’s how the father, Tom, sees it. Tom’s response initially mirrors that of the parable’s older brother. Tom is angry that Daniel is leaving in the first place, as we can imagine the older brother probably was. We don’t know if the father in the parable shared Tom’s feelings about his son leaving, but we can certainly imagine it’s possible.

And the biblical story continues that while the son is still a long way off, the father sees him and runs to greet him. Before telling this story, Jesus has already portrayed God as being like a shepherd with 100 sheep, who, when one of them wanders off, leaves the 99 behind to go after the lost one. Now, if you think about that, that’s a foolish way to act as a shepherd. Losing a sheep here or there is kind of the cost of doing business as a shepherd, but you don’t jeopardize the entire flock to go after just one who strayed away. The second image Jesus gave was of a woman who lost a coin in her house, and emptied everything and swept everywhere until she had found the lost coin. And we might think, “It was one coin, for crying out loud! It’ll turn up - you don’t have to turn the house upside down for one coin, do you?” But Jesus says that’s what God is like - God will turn the house upside down to find the one who is lost. And it’s then that Jesus moves to ~~this~~ story, and he says that while the son is still far off the father sees him and runs toward him, arms open wide, to welcome

him...where? Home. He runs to welcome his son home. He once was lost but now he's found. This, Jesus says, is what God is like.

In the film, Tom doesn't get the chance to welcome his son home though. Daniel dies while he's off wandering and it's the father who has to go find him to bring him home. And unlike the father in our parable, there is no joy in the reunion for Tom. His son is lost, he's not coming home, except perhaps in a box, and in Tom's memories. The father is devastated at having lost his son so soon after having lost his wife, and this is the kind of emotional destruction we can imagine that the father in Jesus' parable experienced in his son's leaving.

Jesus wants us to know that God will go to extravagant measures to find God's lost or wandering children, even if we think they deserve their fate, that they've made their own bed and should have to sleep in it. We think a bit differently, though, when we are the wanderer. And we've all been the wanderer at one point in our lives, in one way or another. We've been the wasteful prodigal. But God welcomes us home, Jesus says, regardless of how far we've strayed, regardless of the nature of our straying. Home is where God's heart is, home is where God calls us to return. You can come home again, God tells us.

Now, some don't like this idea. The older son in the story is downright militant about the fact that the father has welcomed this rebellious younger son home like this. "I've worked my butt off for you. I've followed all the rules. Yet this son of yours comes back and you throw a party for him? What about me?" Likewise, Tom in the film tells Daniel as he's taking him to the airport to depart, "not everyone has the option of just dropping everything and walking away." Tom is thinking more of himself here than he is of his son. His son isn't following what Tom would consider, "the rules," and Tom, like the

older brother in the parable, is pretty much focusing on “what about me?”

We don't always get along with our brothers and sisters, do we kids? Kid's, do you sometimes argue with your brothers and sisters? Here's the last family photo our family had taken before my father died - that's me sitting on my dad's lap, with what Lynn describes as an “ornery” look on my face. And you can see here I have an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister, and often times it seemed like all we did as kids was argue. We'd argue about what to watch on TV, who got to sit where at the dinner table, or who was taking up too much space when we had to share a bedroom. We'd argue about who was smarter, who was stronger, you name it, we'd argue about it. I'm sure it drove our mom, crazy.

When I was little my older sister was much bigger than me, and sometimes, to be a bully, she would sit on me and tickle me or worse, she would drool in my face. And there was nothing I could do about it. Well, it wasn't long before I grew bigger than her. And I remember one day, we were arguing about something silly, and she tried to knock me down so she could sit on me, but instead, I grabbed her, opened the front door of our house, and threw her out the door. Well, she hit the front porch rail, flipped over it, and landed on her backside on the front sidewalk. Our mom was just pulling up in the car from work when she saw my sister flip over the rail and me at the door, and she said she wasn't sure whether she wanted to stop or just keep going!

Well, that's not how I **should** have treated my sister is it? I would claim self-defense. But I think the older and younger brothers in our parable probably fought like that sometimes too, though. The older brother in

Jesus' story can't celebrate that what was once lost is now found because he wasn't the one who was lost - he believed he did it "the right way." He followed all the rules, all the expectations. He did what he was told to do, said what he was supposed to say, and he never got so much as a goat to roast for a party with his friends. We might hear him saying, "he abandoned us, he abandoned his home and his family, let him go! He shouldn't be allowed to even come home, let alone have a party!" In the film, Tom the dad can't celebrate that Daniel is about to go on the trip of a lifetime, to settle what apparently are some real conflicts in his life and his work, because he feels abandoned by his son, he's resentful that Daniel's leaving home - leaving him. That's an easy sentiment to fall into. Grace, God's unmerited, unearned love, is a hard concept to accept if we don't feel like we're on the receiving end of it. Did the younger son in Jesus' story get what he deserved? That depends on your perspective, I suppose. If you're the older brother and you're feeling threatened by or superior to the younger brother, you're likely to believe he got what he deserved when he was homeless and eating with the pigs, because he didn't follow the rules. However, if you're the father... well, this is your child, this is your son. And regardless of what he's done, you love him. He might have made the biggest mistakes in the world, he might have totally messed up his life, he might have made one bad decision after another, but he's still your son, and you love him, and if he comes home you take him in. Even in our own homes and lives, if we make mistakes, if we get in arguments with our family members, they typically don't stop loving us.

And that's what Jesus is saying here about how God is. No matter what or where we call "home" in this physical world, we yearn for a spiritual home within that offers grace, serenity, acceptance, and belonging. I think that's what Daniel is looking for in the film. We don't

know the specifics, but I suspect that home is anything but peaceful or serene for him. He needs something else. From our perspective he may or may not be squandering his life like the younger son in the parable is, but from Tom's perspective he certainly is.

The extravagant acceptance of the father for the son in Jesus' parable, understood as a model for how God is with us, is challenging for us sometimes...that no matter what we've done, who we are, how far we are from what we want to become, that we are always, always, welcomed home by our Loving Parent God.

The grace of God, the love of God, extends beyond our concept of rules or laws, of doctrine or dogma; the grace of God accepts within itself all that we think, or that others might say, that we've done that might separate us from God, and it welcomes us home. Jesus Christ shows us the true nature of the loving God, shows us that we can go home again, that God always and everywhere has *already* welcomed us home - we need only make the journey back to feel the embrace.

Tom thought he had to complete Daniel's journey before he could begin to understand this. As it turned out, it was his own journey that he needed to make. He loved Daniel, there's no doubt about that, but he, Tom, was the one who was really lost and needed to be found; who was blind and could not see. His eyes were opened for him as he made his way along the Camino de Santiago as a homeless traveler, depending on the goodness and grace of others often times in order to have food, a bed, or a roof over his head. It was only then, as his eyes were opened and his heart was strangely warmed, that he began to both experience the extravagant love of God but also to share it with others. We see his transformation as he travels the way.

The way of Jesus is the way home to the prodigal God, who loves us with a luxuriant extravagance that we cannot even imagine. The apostle Paul reminds us, in what seems a promise too good to be true, that there is nothing - nothing we can say, nothing we can do, nothing we can believe or not believe, nothing we can be or not be - that can separate us from the extravagant love of God.

So, what are we to do with that? First of all, cherish it. Remember it. Embrace it. Give thanks for it. And then, share it. Run, like the father in the parable, to embrace those in your life who need to know the extravagant generosity of the grace of God. Forgive those in your life who need to be forgiven, set aside the “rules and expectations” of human society in order to live into, model, and share the love of God for all of God’s children, as it has been shared with you! Because that’s ~~who~~ we ~~all~~ are - regardless of ~~what~~ we are, or ~~how~~ we are, or ~~where~~ we are, we are all the wandering, wasteful, but beloved children of the Prodigal God, who watches with arms wide open, in anticipation and celebration of our coming home. Thanks be to the Prodigal God! Amen.