

## Come Home

Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, (April 6, 2025)

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Today we come to what is often called “the crown jewel of Jesus’ parables,” This is Luke at his best. Last week, we had the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Today we have perhaps the only parable to surpass it, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I love this parable.

“A certain man had two sons,” (15:11), so says Jesus and we are off into the story. We know this family. We know dozens of families like this. Perhaps our family is one of them.

Already in that short sentence we are introduced to the characters of this story: a certain man, and two sons. Immediately, one of the sons, we soon discover the older one, goes offstage, not to be seen until later. That leaves the younger son and the father, and the younger son asks for money – his share of the father’s estate in advance, his inheritance. And the father grants his request.

The son gathers all he had, probably converting everything to cash, and travels to a distant country to live his own way, on his own – a different place and a different life. And right off, the boy blows all his money in dissolute living. And it does not take long.

Talk about bad timing. The boy goes broke about the same time a famine sweeps the land. His life is falling apart and in desperation he becomes a kind of indentured servant to a local citizen. His job is so menial that he is reduced to feeding pigs, no small thing to Jewish listeners to this story. In other words, his

work is about as bad as it gets. Furthermore, he is starving. He is hungry enough to eat the pig slop, and it says, “no one gave him anything” (15:16). He is flat broke, starving to death, with no friendships or relationships.

Then there is a turning point with the words, “he came to himself,” meaning he came to his senses. He looks around at where he is, what he has become, and speaks to himself, “Even my father’s hired hands eat better than this, and here I am dying of hunger!” He stands up and makes a decision, “I’m going back to my father, and I’m going to say, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands’” (15:18-19). This is important: he has hit bottom and comes to himself. This is the beginning of repentance.

To repent in the Bible is not about feelings of remorse and crying tears of sorrow. Repentance in Hebrew literally means “returning.” It means returning to God, and no doubt it means a change of heart, but in the Bible, in the New Testament, in Luke, and in this parable, repentance is always, always, always about a changed life. It means that you are changing your citizenship. You once were a citizen, following all the laws and rules and behavior of “dissolute living” of a “distant country” just like most all citizens of that country, to the ways of God and God’s people. Repentance is a change of location, from the distant country to home with the father. Old Testament scholar Joseph P. Healey wrote, “Repentance is defined by clear actions that lead to justice, mercy, and fidelity” (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:672).

Realtors always say real estate is about “location, location, location.” Well, the same is true in this parable. So far, we have heard about the location of home, which the son left to go to a second location, in a distant country, which meant not

simply a change of residence, but also a change in how one lived and acted. Now, the younger son is returning to the home of his father, which in theological terms is the family of God.

The boy starts home, and “while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (15:20). The term “far off” is significant in Luke and Acts. For Luke, humanity is at a great distance, “far off” from God, and it is about a God, who like the father in this parable, runs toward humanity to close the gap, to forgive and to heal and make whole.

Note also the pattern of seeing and having compassion just like last week in the Good Samaritan parable. The priest and the Levite saw but had no compassion and hurried past the man in the ditch. But the Samaritan saw the man, had compassion, and got down in the ditch with him to help. Here the father sees the son from afar, has compassion, and runs to him. He embraces the son in forgiveness and reconciliation.

The previous parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin both emphasize great joy in heaven “over one sinner who repents,” and now in this parable there is great joy at home and the celebration begins. The young man who was starving in the distant country and where no one gave him anything, now has a fattened calf, and a father who “gives him everything.”

And the father makes a statement that is the theological core of this parable: “Let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (15:23). These themes continue with Luke as he tells us about the church being a community of redeemed sinners, saved and made whole by Jesus, turning from the ways of death to the ways of the resurrected life, eating

together “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46), and the Lord “added to their number those ... being saved” (Acts 2:47).

So far, we’ve heard about two locations: the distant country and the homeplace of the father, which now is filled with music, dancing, food, and laughter (15:25). But there is one more location we need to visit. A third place: the field where the older brother is working. Notice that though it is within walking distance from the house, it too has become a kind of “distant country,” a place contrasting with the joyful celebration inside the house.

The older brother gets a servant to find out what is going on. The servant returns excited, “Your brother has come home, your father has killed the fatted calf because your brother is back safe and sound” (15:27). When the older brother hears this, he becomes angry, resentful, and refuses to go into the celebration inside.

And the father who had run out to meet and embrace his younger son, now goes out to his other son. It says he went out “pleading” for the son to come in and join the party. But the word means, comfort and encouragement. This is a loving father, putting his arm around the shoulder of the older son, saying, “Come on. You can do this. He’ll be so glad to see you.”

But the older son will not be comforted and will not come in, “Listen! I’ve been working for years like a servant keeping this place going. I’ve never complained; I’ve never asked for money or my inheritance, and I’ve always done everything you asked, never disobeying you. But when this son of yours comes back from blowing all his money on prostitutes, and you kill the fatted calf for him! The very calf I’ve been feeding.”

The older son has always played by the rules. As he says, “I’ve never disobeyed.” “I always show up, I’m the first in the fields and the last to leave. I’m the overachiever. I’m a good guy. Meanwhile, that son of yours breaks every rule and there are no consequences. If we didn’t have some rules, we’d all die in some sort of distant country.”

Stan and Cindy are celebrating their 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary today. They also have a brand-new Ford Explorer with all the bells and whistles, including the most up-to-date computer technology. For example, if you exceed the speed limit by more than 2 mph, the sensors will slow you down to the speed limit. And somehow or another, when the speed limit changes, the sensors know and adjust accordingly. The car keeps you between the lines, and if you stray across the line, it will warn you and steer you back. It will warn you if you get too close to the car in front of you and automatically slow you down. You get the idea. This car follows the rules and makes sure you follow them and stay between the lines. This is an elder brother car.

Pay attention to Luke’s language. The father says, “your brother” while the older son says, “this son of yours.” And the older son does not even refer to his father by name, and instead, angrily says, “Listen!”

The father appeals, “Son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours but let us celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” The father says, “It is not that I’m ignoring the rules. It’s that my rules are different. My rules make relationships the main thing. My first rule is to love God with everything of who you are. My second rule is to love your neighbor as yourself.”

And that's how it ends. We never do know what happened. For Luke and for Jesus, the appeal is still going on.

Like all parables, part of the challenge is for us listeners to put ourselves in the parable.

For now, know this. This parable goes for it all. Holds nothing back. It tells us about a God so loving and merciful, that God goes out of the house in two directions: to welcome both the younger son and the older son. God embraces those whose ruined lives and mess-ups and bad choices and just plain old stupidity, have generated **self-loathing**. At the same time, God goes out to those whose lives of obedience have generated **other loathing**. There is joy and music and feasting inside God's house for both sons, for all sons and daughters who hear God's call, "**Come home**" (see Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, p. 326).

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.