

# Welcome Home!

The Parable of the Prodigal Son:  
a reflection on outward and inward waywardness.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Our Gospel Reading this morning is one of the most popular and well-known stories in the Bible. It's most often referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A more appropriate name may be the Parable of the Two Lost Sons. It has been termed "the pearl of the parables," and "the greatest short story ever told," and has even been summarized as "the gospel within the gospel." [Read the passage.]

I am convinced that this parable is one of the most important and revealing biblical passages about the nature and character of God - and about our own nature and character. Much of the fascination of this remarkable parable lies in its ability to resonate with life experiences of so many throughout time:

- adolescent rebellion;
- alienation from family;
- the appeal of that which is new, exotic and foreign;
- the consequences of foolish living,
- the warmth of home remembered;
- the experience of self-awareness, awakening, and repentance;
- the joy of reunion;
- the power of forgiveness;
- the dysfunctional dynamics of family that can lead to one sibling's departure and to another's indignation and resentment;
- and, the contrast between relationships based on merit and relationships based on faithful love.

Each of these themes deserves a full sermon. And I'm sure you've heard many sermons throughout the years dealing with these various perspectives. Today, however, I want us to focus on the part of the story that presents **the image of returning home**.

Returning home is a familiar theme in the Bible, especially as it pertains to returning home to God. The Old Testament passage that we read on Ash Wednesday from Joel 2:12-13, states, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Moved and inspired by a Rembrandt painting entitled, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, author of Christian spirituality, Henri Nouwen wrote a book in 1994 entitled, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Earlier, back in 1989, Nouwen wrote a daily Lenten devotional booklet entitled, "Returning: God's Love Calls Us Home." In his first entry he writes, "**The story of the prodigal son is a story about returning – and that makes it an ideal Lenten parable.**"

See if you can relate in some way to the following reflection from Nouwen, "I have come to realize the need for returning over and over again. My life drifts away from God. I have to return. My heart moves away from my first love. I have to return. My mind wanders. I have to return. Returning is a life-long struggle that is renewed each Lent."

Let's take a look at what it means to "leave home" in the first place. In this parable, going to "a distant country" represents the place where one turns away from treasured values and traditions that are held by the family and home community. While it can mean a literal leaving home, this parable also suggests that there can be a spiritual "leaving home."

The prodigal son reflects this in his rebellious, reckless behavior, that can be characterized as a kind of outward waywardness. Or, as Nouwen reflects, **we leave home every time we deny the spiritual reality that we belong to God and that our true home is with God. We leave home every time we search outside of God to earn and win the love we so much desire.**

He suggests that what is really at issue in this parable is: To whom do I belong? To God or to the world? Nouwen asks, "**Do you search for God's love or the world's love?** We are prodigal sons and daughters, leaving home to travel to a 'distant country' every time we search for unconditional love where it *can't* be found. And we venture from our true home, from God, every time we say, 'I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody.'"

The choice, then, for all of us prodigal sons and daughters is simple, though not necessarily easy. **To return or not to return home to God. This parable forces us to choose.** So let me ask you to reflect upon the following personal question. Where are you at this moment in your own journey of faith? Using the language of this parable, have you come 'to your senses'? Have you headed back for home yet? Are you still far off, nearly home, or already home?

By indentifying with the younger, prodigal son in this parable, we are faced with questions like: **Do you and I really understand the nature of God's grace?** Do we fully accept deep within our own being that God constantly waits for us with unconditional love to receive us with open arms, no questions asked, always ready to celebrate our homecoming?

As you know this parable isn't only about one lost son. There is another lost son. This one, however, stayed near his father's house his entire life. **If the younger, prodigal son represents outward waywardness, the elder son can reflect what happens to us when we experience an inward waywardness.** He is eaten up inside by the resentment he feels toward his father's acceptance and forgiveness of his younger brother. In this parable, the older son, much like the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable, **can represent those in the religious community who have a problem with God's inclusive love and grace.**

This parable tells us of two children from the same parents; they grow up together yet are as different from one another as day and night. You may have experienced this phenomenon in your own family. Using more modern psychological terms, the younger, prodigal son could be labeled as a **"rebel" child**, and his older brother could be labeled as a **"model" child**. You know the type - the kind of person that does all the things that good sons and daughters are supposed to do. They do their duty, are hard working and fulfill all their obligations. They are obedient and try with all their might to live up to the expectations of their parents. It is important that they succeed and are found to be acceptable, likable, and a worthy example. And a

conscious effort is made to avoid obvious, outward sins. (I know a lot of Presbyterians like that. And I see one in the mirror every morning.)

I think that one of the most important points that Jesus wants to remind us of is that **we often mistakenly associate being lost only in terms of our visible actions**. We can see the prodigal son's sins. His lostness is quite obvious – the misuse of his money, time, friends, his own body. His misbehavior was clear-cut, the consequences of which led to his misery.

However, the lostness of the elder son is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was respected and admired. But when his obviously sinful, outcast younger brother returns home he was unexpectedly confronted with his father's emotions of compassion and joy. Suddenly there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, prideful, unkind, selfish person.

In a sermon on this parable, the Reverend James Forbes, a Presbyterian pastor, had this to say about the true character of the elder son, "He was a moralistic, legalistic, insensitive, narrow-minded, self-righteous, holier-than-thou, Calvinistic workaholic." I guess that about sums it up.

In her novel, *The Prodigal Heart*, Susan Ertz summarizes the difference between the two brothers this way, "**While the younger son was prodigal in body, at least part of his heart was always at home; but the elder brother was prodigal at heart, and only his body was at home.**" He had become a foreigner in his own house.

We are told that while the elder son was working dutifully in the fields he heard the sound of music and dancing. But notice something very important that is often missed in this parable. Just as the loving father went out to the prodigal son upon his return, **the father also goes out to the elder son** and extends the invitation for him to come into the house and join the party.

The elder son's reply to his father reveals the depth of his lostness, "I have worked like a slave, and have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me?" It becomes clear that he based his relationship with his father on merit, not love. **We learn that joy and resentment cannot coexist**. Resentment and complaining are often the bitter fruit of those who have the need to please and try to earn love. That includes trying to please God with the mistaken notion that it's something we have to earn, rather than something freely given.

Comparing the sins of the younger prodigal son to his elder brother, Nouwen asks, "**In the end, what does more damage, lust or resentment?**" He offers this scathing observation, "There is so much resentment among the 'just' and 'righteous.' So much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the 'saints.' So much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding 'sin'." **If we find ourselves in this category, then we need to return home to God just as much as the prodigal son.**

**So how will you and I, how will we as a congregation, respond to God's offer of complete forgiveness and unconditional love?**

One final thought from Nouwen on what we learn from this parable. "**God has no desire to punish wayward children. Inner and outer waywardness is its own punishment. God simply wants to let us know that the love we have searched for in such distorted ways has been, is, and always will be there for us.**"

So whether you find yourself in a "distant country" or standing out in the field nearby, hear God's voice calling you to come home. Remember who and whose you are. **Listen for the voice of God that joyously cries out, "Welcome Home!"**

Amen.