

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 6, 2016

"Come Home."

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A certain aged Catholic priest had become deaf. So members of his parish would write out their sins on a piece of paper before going to confession. One day, a parishioner slipped a piece of paper to the priest which read: "Two loaves of bread, a gallon of milk, a box of detergent, a pound of bananas." The puzzled priest scanned the note, then passed it back to the parishioner. The parishioner looked at it, then exclaimed with horror, "Oh, no! I left my sins at the grocery store."

Well, where did you leave your sins? Where should we leave them? How can we be rid of our sins forever? The answer, of course, is repentance, which means, in essence, "turn around: go home." Repentance is what the prodigal son did. He turned around and went back home. That's the best way to rid yourself of sin.

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son captures the essence of the Christian faith. It is a story of repentance and forgiveness and grace. It is also, however, a story of self-righteousness, resentment, and anger. It has a very familiar beginning. "There was a man who had two sons." So from the beginning, we are introduced to three characters.

The first, of course, is the prodigal. He's the younger boy. Adventurous. Rebellious. Determined to learn life's lessons by making his own mistakes. Some of you can identify with him. You've been there.

In Jesus' story the younger son says to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So the father divides his property between his two sons and the younger one sets off for a distant country and he squanders his wealth in wild living. After all his wealth is gone there's a severe famine in the country, and this young man's in trouble. He's hungry. So he hires himself to a local farmer who sends him to his fields to feed the pigs, which is the worst job in the world for a good Jewish boy. He is so hungry, Luke tells us, he would gladly have eaten the pods that the pigs are eating.

Finally, we're told, "he comes to himself." He heads back home with his tail between his legs. He is hungry and hurting. Home is starting to look awfully good. However, is he truly penitent or is he simply posing, play-acting, so he can worm himself back into his father's good graces? We don't know. Since this is a parable and not a real life incident, there is no follow up. We can only imagine that he's heading home for good.

Or maybe not! Some of you may know a young person who has become involved with drugs. The first thing to go is their truthfulness. Many parents today know what it is like to have a young person on drugs come back home, confess their sins, vow to do better, and then not only leave again, but steal money on the way back out the door. In these cases, a parent asks, "How many times am I supposed to forgive?" How many times do I let him come back home?

Let's assume the young man in Jesus' parable is truly penitent. Let's assume he's ready to take on responsibilities. We can sympathize with him. He's learned some hard lessons, but at least he is back home. Most of all, He's learned how lonesome it can be when you turn your back on those who love you. He's headed home. He has done wrong. He has repented. Now he is headed toward the safety of his father's house.

The second character is his father. The young man has rehearsed what he is going to say to his father. "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son' make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' So they began to celebrate. The father, of course, represents God. God in all his grace and love. This parable ought to be called the Parable of the Waiting Father rather than the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Everything depends on God's grace.

There is a third character in the story, the elder brother. His story is so different from that of his brother. The elder brother didn't go into the far country. He didn't lose his inheritance, didn't live among pigs. He stayed home...did what was expected of him. He was obedient to a fault. But listen to how he responds to his brother's return.: "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come home,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him."

Notice how he refers to his relationship with his father. He says, "All these years I've been slaving for you..." Those are revealing words. Not "working for you" or "serving you" or "helping with the family farm." No, he says he was "slaving for his father." Duty without beauty. Notice how he refers to his brother: "But when this son of yours...comes home" He can't refer to him as his brother, but as "this son of yours."

The father tries to set him straight. "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Notice that the father reminds the elder son, first of all, that the prodigal is his brother! Sometimes that happens to those who are so eager to condemn those who are weaker and have given into temptation. They are still our brothers and sisters.

The elder son looks with critical eyes and a cold unforgiving heart at both his brother who has broken all the rules and his father, so eager to welcome his wayward son back home. The elder brother is spiteful, angry, resentful. And some of us understand that. We sometimes wonder why God bends over backward to welcome back the wayward and seems to ignore those of us who have always played by the rulebook. It is hard for us to accept that Jesus sees more hope in the much deserved humility of the prodigal than the self-righteous indignation of his brother. And yet it is important that we do hear Jesus' message.

We sometimes read this parable and consign the elder brother to be the supporting cast, a minor character in the narrative. The truth is, Jesus may have intended for him to be the central character in the story. Remember who Jesus is telling this parable to. It is the religious leaders of the day. The first two verses in the chapter tell us that. We read, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law grumbled, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

The story of the prodigal is intended to give hope to the tax collectors and the sinners. But it is a devastating judgment on the attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees. For they are the elder brother in Jesus' parable keeping the Law, but looking with disdain upon those not as righteous as they. And that is how the church appears to many people in our society today. We've become grumbling warriors instead of committed seekers. Such attitudes are making it more and more difficult for us to reach people, especially young people, with the message of Christ.

Three characters: the penitent prodigal; his loving and gracious parent (God); and the smug, self-righteous brother. If you're the prodigal, come home. It's not too late. If you're the elder brother, also please come home. Come home to the waiting arms of the Father. Amen.