

Prodigal Sons—coming home to grace

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Where is HOME? What is it like or what it like to come home...especially after a long journey or absence...to come home to the people who love you? Who know you and love you? Who make room for you and cook for you and care for you...close your eyes and imagine it...coming home... now hold on to that for awhile, we will get back to that.

In the middle of Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a series of parables in which he seeks to define for us the nature of God's seeking love and amazing grace. He tells us about the lost sheep...how God is the good shepherd who searches for the sheep not until it gets dark or until he gets tired or until it gets difficult, but until the sheep is found. And then instead of punishing the sheep, he gently restores the sheep to the flock...going so far as to carry it on his shoulders back to the pasture. He tells of the woman who has lost a valuable silver coin. She turns her house inside out and searches high and low UNTIL she finds the coin, and then she rejoices that the lost coin was found! She celebrates! And then the story of the prodigals...a story that has reverberated down through the ages.

It is full of wisdom. It is both simple and complex. It is easy to understand on its face and we can learn a lot about God and mercy...but it is also deep and the more we explore it the more we learn. Let's take a moment to look at it this morning.

There are three characters. And at times in our lives, we might find ourselves in each of these roles. The first role is that of the Father. The Father is God's role, the one who is long suffering and full of mercy and grace. God is the one who forgives the wayward son. It is grace. He does not deserve to be treated as a son, he has forfeited that right when he asked for his inheritance early. He had basically said he wanted the father dead...and had left the family. When the son returns, he has

rehearsed his lines well...I am no longer worthy to be called your son, simply treat me as one of your hired men. And that would have been kind and generous. The law would have allowed the father to extract revenge upon the son. But love overcomes these emotions, and mercy triumphs over judgment! Thank God! Regardless of what he deserves (or we deserve!), he is a child of the Master! He has been redeemed with a great price. We are redeemed by the grace of Christ and as the Bible says, bought with a great price...the blood of Christ upon the cross. Our salvation is not dependent upon what we do or accomplish, or how sorry we are or how much we have suffered or how much grief we have known. It is not us at all. It is HIM, God, the great loving father and his great loving heart. Which melts at the sight of this his child, battered and bleeding, so alone and afraid and defeated. So in need of forgiveness and grace. It is God's great heart that sends Jesus to save us, out of Love. God demonstrates his great love for us in that while we were still sinning Christ came and died for us. *Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should'st die for me!*

But, it's not fair you say. No, it is not. Where did you get the idea that God was going to be fair? Believe me, you really don't want God to be fair, because when we are upset that God's mercy is unfair we are sympathizing with the older brother...who we will deal with in a moment.

The younger brother is responsible for his own actions...and they were wrong. But those wrong actions had consequences. He suffered, and felt the pain of his choices. He hurt others and himself. He was starving in body, and wanted to eat the slop fed to the hogs. I don't know if any of you ever slopped any hogs, but I have had the rare privilege and you would have to be very, very hungry to want to get in there with the pigs and fight it out for a meal!

He knew the shame of having been fooled by shallow friends and the bite of addiction and overindulgence. He had to swallow his pride and come home with his tail between his legs, knowing the reaction of

his brother...and hoping for a positive one from his father. He had sinned greatly against God and his father, and he knew it and it weighed upon him greatly. He had been beaten down mentally, physically and spiritually. Sin has its price, and it's not pretty. Those who think the prodigal "got away with something" should have seen him when he walked in the gate...looking half dead.

The father saw him, while he was still far off. He never gave up watching for him or waiting for him to come home. Hoping that he might just do this, come to his senses and come home. He could have played it cool, waited for him be ushered in and seem aloof and made him grovel. He could have made him beg for morsels off the table and made him work in the kitchen for scraps. But NO, this was his son, whom he never stopped loving! He forgave him! He ran to him...him, the king, the master, the Lord...he ran! Again, the great heart of Love pushes him to run to gather up his son. He hugs and kisses him and completely ignores his prepared speech!

Bring the robe, the ring, some slippers! Kill the fatted calf! Pour the best wine...strike up the band, invite the neighbors, send out the word, my son who was dead is alive, he who was lost is found, rejoice with me! He who was lost is found....Rejoice!

Wow. Sometimes we are this son, who experiences the amazing, awesome Grace of God and all we can do is sing! And sometimes we are called upon to be in the Father role, to be the one to forgive. This is harder, of course. We must depend upon God to help us, to give us his great heart of love, so that we might love others as he loves us. And forgive as we are forgiven.

And sometimes we find ourselves feeling like the older brother, jealous and angry. In some ways we can sympathize with the older brother, he played by the rules, he did not run off and waste his life on wine,

women, drugs and such...and he resented the attention his brother was getting. He wanted to see him punished. The story is really about two prodigals...one who left and one who stayed...but both are prodigals at heart.

Can you put the emotion of the older brother into words...listen to this: video....

Perhaps extreme...but it really gets you thinking doesn't it? Wow.

The older brother refuses to come to the party for his brother, but goes out to pout. Again, the father makes the effort...he goes out to where the brother is. He comes to him and tries to reconcile with him. This too breaks the social norm. He is the father, he could have called his son to him, or ordered him to attend the party...but the Father takes the initiative. Just like God does with us. He comes to us, he sent his Son for us...

The father reassures the son. He says that he must come and join in because his brother who was dead is now alive. He who was lost is now found. The brother complains that he has worked all these years and that he has never had a party...he is afraid that the father will give some of the estate to the son again. The Father says that all that he has is yours...and has been...you could have had anything you desired all along. You have lived like a servant because you choose to. It has been your shortsightedness that has kept you living such, not me! But come, begin anew now...join in. your brother is back, rejoice with me! He was dead and is now alive!

The sin of the brother is comparing himself to his brother. This is always a sin...on both sides—either I don't measure up and I am not worth anything or I'm better than him or her and I should get more than they do.... both are wrong and lead to pain and difficulty. Instead of enjoying a piece of cake set before him, he spends his time comparing who has a slightly bigger piece than him or who's piece is smaller than his and is thus inferior. He is always insecure. It is worse, it is also a

lack of trust. The son lacks faith in the father to fulfill his word and take care of him.

And he has been working these years under false pretense—doing what he has done not as a part of the family for the common good, but to earn reward. I doubt that the attitude exhibited here was new...the sense of entitlement, ownership, and an ungrateful spirit. The older son is jealous of the grace given his brother.

And God's grace is not fair, it is merciful. If God were fair, we would all be punished for the sins that we commit...knowingly and unknowingly. But God's great heart of love searches for us until we are found and brings us home...he runs to us even when we are far off and comes out to argue with us even when we are having a moment and are pouting on the porch and not getting our way! God is patient and kind and loving. God is a parent who treasures all his children...the wayward and the haughty and prideful ones. God does not treat us fairly, but gracefully and with mercy abounding.

And God calls us all to come back home...where there is a place of welcome for us...a place where we are loved and appreciated, where there is always room for us and where it is as if we never left. Breathe deep the rich air of home.