

Coming Home

Luke 15: 1 - 3, 11b - 32

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Prayer: O God, in the wilderness you weaned your children from dependence on your manna to the solid food of Cana. Help us to seek to be mature disciples, considering not only the sins which are easy to set by, but also the ones which dog us even if only in our minds. You call us to join you at the banquet of life, help us to find our way to that table...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God...

Who is the church without a building?

What is a church without an ability to gather people together?

These used to be theoretical questions. "Of course the church is not the building, it's the people," we would say... when we stood in the building. Today the church is not the building ...at all. We are separated from the building and we are separated from one another per Governor Lamont's emergency orders.

Last week Jim Boratko filmed while we put a worship service together in different spaces in our nearly empty church building; we were keeping our gatherings to less than 10 people. I am in my own home today. My husband and two of our children are with me, and our cat Frank — not a church goer — who may put in an appearance here.

In every age in history, people of faith have held up the scriptures and reflected upon their life circumstances. The parable of the man with two sons, sometimes called "the parable of the prodigal," comes in Luke's gospel after a series of parables about losing things.

- A shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep and goes to retrieve it — when it is found he lays it on his shoulders and brings it home, calling together his friends and neighbors rejoicing.
- A woman who loses one of her ten silver coins — when she finds it she celebrates with friends
- Today we have lost things we didn't even think we could lose:
 - The handshake,
 - the open for business sign,
 - the hair salon,
 - the meal out with friends,
 - time away.

You can hear and understand Jesus parables on many levels. You can listen just to the story, but not think about its meaning — like a child listens to a bedtime story. You can listen to it, and then poke your neighbor in the ribs and point out how it really is about them ...and then you might listen and find something of yourself revealed in a kind of mirror. Jesus told many parables, like so many mirrors, to his disciples and to the crowds he taught, inviting them to look into these stories and to consider what they saw.

Some of us are at home, and some of us are separated from those we love. Surely today more than ever, we recognize that we also love those who are not in our homes with us. We are struggling to convey the meaning of our virtual love to those we cannot go and see and hug or bake for, or go and check on; and if you have been at home for a while now “sheltering in place,” you may be sensitive to the issues of being in close proximity with ones you love — how it may be that we come to take each other for granted when we are together all the time.

The father has two sons: one who has wasted his inheritance on a wild and destructive lifestyle, and the other who cannot welcome his brother back home. This father has a problem because both of his sons are in the wrong. The younger boy turned his back on his father, the older boy turned his back on his brother; both are wrong to do it. And yet the father keeps telling them, how much he loves them — these boys who are so different from each other.

If God is like the father in this story, and your story is like the story of the prodigal son, Jesus himself has ensured that if we are willing to come to our senses — when we walk on back to the God who loves us, God will accept us. Our sins will be forgiven, every time we ask. God celebrates when we turn towards God. No matter how far off we walk, or how far we think we have gone from the presence of God, we can come home and even the angels will rejoice in heaven. God loves you, all the time, in all circumstances; you can turn and come home. That’s what the prodigal son knows, that he can knock and the door will be opened, he can seek and he will find.

Jesus spent much of his ministry noticing faith in unexpected people — the leper who turned back and said thank you when healed, the woman who touched the hem of his garment and found herself healed, the samaritan, the centurion. Faith is not restricted to those who have their act together.

But if your story is the story of the older son, you have a different problem. If that Father is God in this story, and your story is that you have judged your brother — turned your back on him — there is nothing that God can do about that. That has been your choice, your judgment resides within you. Just as it grieved the heart of the father in the story that one boy would not welcome

the other back, still he could not physically make him come in and celebrate. His boys are grownups.

God may be grieved by the way we treat one another, but God has given us free will ...and we can turn our backs on our brothers and sisters if we so choose.

Jesus didn't solve this problem in his parable of the prodigal son, or in his parable of the fig tree which is given another year to see whether or not it will bear fruit. Jesus wondered whether the Pharisees and the Sadducees in his day would recognize faith in the people who didn't belong to their tribe or do things the right way.

God only is competent to pass judgment ...and God has chosen to offer our sisters and brothers a welcome home. Who are we to offer them less? So as you look into this parable that Jesus tells, consider how God's story is your own story. Consider the mirror, inviting some of us to come to our senses and to come home, and some of us to cease our judgments and to come out and to celebrate as God celebrates ...when someone comes to their senses, and turns around a destructive lifestyle.

GK Chesterton said that there are essentially two ways to get home: one is to go away and to come back; the other is never to leave. And there can be a major conflict between wanting to go, and resenting that we have stayed — or leaving, and regretting that we did not value what we have been given. Jesus' parable about the prodigal son, and his brother at home, reveals a tension familiar to many of us.

There is a prose poem which has been shared widely right now on social media, by Kitty O'Meara, a former teacher and chaplain — A poem for our times, *And the People Stayed Home*:

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Friends this is an opportunity for healing and renewal, it is also a time when many of us, like this poem says, may meet our shadow.

You are part of God's beloved community:

- You are the church without a building,
- You are a part of a people who are not gathered.

What will that mean for you, your words and your choices, in the days to come?

In the parable, God says that the prodigal will be welcomed home. We do not know whether the older brother will change his heart.

God waits for the one to come home, and also waits for the other one to cease his jealous judgments and to come out to celebrate the return of his reformed brother.

This week I have had in mind a quote I often think about when I can't go where I want to or do what I want: Kabir, who was a 14th century Indian mystic, said:

"I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for three days and God came to me."

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