

Come Home!

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Luke 15:

[1] Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

[2] And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

[3] So he told them this parable:

[11].... "There was a man who had two sons;

[12] and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

[13] Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living.

[14] And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want.

[15] So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine.

[16] And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

[17] But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!

[18] I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

[19] I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

[20] And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

[21] And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

[22] But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet;

[23] and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry;

[24] for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

[25] "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

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[26] And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.

[27] And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.'

[28] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

[29] but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

[30] But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

[31] And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

[32] It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

After my shoulder surgery on March 12, the surgeon told me to wear my arm in a sling. And I did, for a week. I'm just not lifting anything heavier than a coffee cup or this pair of binoculars.

This week, working on the sermon at home, I went out on the front porch with these binoculars. They help to look down the road, you know, to see if he or she is coming. I brought them with me this morning. Because, I've discovered that with today's Gospel binoculars, if you will, we can see right into the heart of God. That is, if we look down the Gospel road.

Let me show you – I looked it up in the dictionary – the word, prodigal. The first meaning is: very generous. The second meaning is: recklessly wasteful. The third meaning is: marked by rash extravagance.

I looked for the word in the Bible, but couldn't find it. That's because it's not there. Not in the Revised Standard Version, not the King James Version, not the Greek New Testament itself.

That means we have to examine some of the things we've been told over the years about this famous parable by well-meaning preachers who failed to look far enough down the Gospel Road. The first thing we need to realize is that the story isn't about the sons. It's totally about the Father.

The Father - that is, God - is the central figure. God is willing to give us lots of freedom and let us take lots of risks with our lives. God knows some of us will stray. And God knows some of us will stay home and be dutiful and responsible. For now God accepts us just as we are. If we stray, God will always be there waiting for us to return.

Jesus tells us that it is God's very nature to be loving and forgiving and accepting. And not just a little

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bit. God is wild about us! God is waiting and watching for our return! The robe has been carefully selected from the finest tailor. The ring sparkles as it lies there on the red velvet cloth. The new shoes are as shiny as mirrors. The band has been practicing for weeks. Ten thousand party hats and noisemakers have been ordered.

God is out on the porch each day. With a pair of long-range binoculars, God scans the horizon. When God is not scanning the horizon, God is looking at old photographs. There's a good one – he was just a day old. Then the baptism. Such a great day! Then here's the first day of school picture. Look at the missing teeth! Then, how 'bout this one - confirmation day! Was that ever a tear-jerker!

Now listen to the parent in Jesus' parable speak as a modern-day parent in contemporary dialogue:

Our youngest son, Jesse, was talking about seeing the world when he was only a freshman in high school. He sent postcards during basic training and after he arrived in the Philippines. But then the postcards stopped. I tried to track him down, but after his enlistment was up, I never knew where he went. That was a long time ago. I think he sent his older brother some postcards from Hong Kong with some girls on the front. But he was a good kid. A really good kid. I know he'll come home. I just know it. And I can't wait!

And Edmund, my oldest son. He never left home. Anything I've ever asked of him, he's been willing to do. He's really helped me keep this place going. I don't know what I would do without him. But I don't love him because of what he does. I love him because of who he is – he really is a great guy! Someday I want you to meet him. I know you'll like him.

And I also want you to meet Jesse once he comes home. I know you'll like him too. He was always a little fidgety, a little restless, and, yes, you might say, a little wild. But he was also smart as a whip. And he had a deep side to him too. I know he's grown. His big brother, Edmund, has always been on the quiet side. He never cared for parties or dancing or bars. He was always trying to figure out how to make the farm run better and running soil tests and going to 4-H meetings. You should see the gun rack he made for me in shop one year. I'm really proud of him. Can you believe, we've never had a cross word with each other! He's always been willing to do anything I asked.

Do you know anyone like my boys? Are any of your children like them? Were you ever like either of them? Yes? Well, you know what it's like then - whichever side of the coin you find yourself on.

When you're a parent, no matter what your children do or where they go, you always, always love them and accept them and are ready to welcome them home. Nobody's perfect. Each of us is trying to find a way. Some just get detoured a little more than others. Our job as parents is to be as extravagant with our love and acceptance as possible. And if you're the child, you should always know your parent will

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always welcome you home.

Why, I knew a man. My wife Elsie's uncle. His name was John. He's dead now. He and his wife had a son, Victor. Victor's IQ was measured at genius level. Yet he was unhappy and refused to apply himself in school. Then he got involved in drugs. He got married young. It didn't work out. He married someone else. That didn't work out. Then he married somebody else. Then there was jail. And his father bailed him out. Then something, I don't know what, clicked. He came to his senses somehow. Got a good job with a newspaper. Got into AA. Got saved and started going to church. Through all of this, Victor's father was always loving and accepting and non-judging, always willing for Victor to come home. After Victor's father's funeral, I told Victor his dad was one of the greatest men I have ever known. And Victor knew what I was talking about.

Let me wrap this up before I exit with my binoculars by reading some very good stuff from a guy named Peter J. Gomes, who used to be the African-American gay ecumenical Christian Chaplain at Harvard University. It's from his book Strength for the Journey. Look down the Gospel Road with this:

"The [so-called] prodigal is willful, foolish, profligate, self-centered, self-pitying, and indulgent. He comes home only when he has nowhere else to go. The elder brother is petty, spiteful, jealous, self-righteous, and rather lacking in imagination. I think we should pity the poor father, who has to live with this . . . perhaps he should have run away and left the place to the two of them to fight it out.

"He didn't, though, because the story is about him . . . We know of . . . his nature because of what his sons say and do. The [so-called] prodigal tells us of the character of his father when he says at his lowest point, in the midst of his degradation . . . 'I will arise and go to my father.' . . . [T]his boy knew that his father's nature was love; and his knowledge was rewarded and returned.

". . . This is the heart of the gospel and of Jesus' message: no one is too far gone, too low, too abased, too bad to be removed from the unconditional love of the Father, not even the baddest of the bad; and no one is too good, too dutiful, too full of rectitude, for that love."

Here in the middle of Lent, Dr. Gomes continues:

".... it is the loving, [the] waiting [the real prodigal-profusely-extravagant] Father to whom our hearts now turn: among us there are perhaps more prigs than prodigals, more younger sons, older sons, younger sisters, older sisters, more elder brothers who feel neglected by the Father than prodigals who run away from him; but no matter which of these sons is our patron saint, the same loving Father waits for us to return . . ." ¹

¹ Peter J. Gomes, Strength for the Journey, Harper, 2003, pp. 237-239.

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If you'd care to join me now, maybe we can sing the boy-the girl-the man-the woman-me-you? home. I know we'll be right along.

²Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.

Refrain:
Come home, come home,
You who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading,
Pleading for you and for me?
Why should we linger and heed not His mercies,
Mercies for you and for me?

Refrain

Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing,
Passing from you and from me;
Shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,
Coming for you and for me.

Refrain

O for the wonderful love He has promised,
Promised for you and for me!
Though we have sinned, He has mercy and pardon,
Pardon for you and for me.

Refrain

AMEN

² Will L. Thompson, 1880; when evangelist Dwight Moody was on his death bed, he told Thompson: "Will, I would rather have written 'Softly and Tenderly' than anything I have been able to do in my whole life. The hymn was sung in the 1985 Academy Award winning movie, "Trip to Bountiful".

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