

Home

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Community Presbyterian Church, Rochester, Minnesota

4th Sunday after Lent - March 27, 2022

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

GOSPEL READING Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

Of all Jesus' parables, this story of extravagant waste, extravagant repentance, and extravagant love may be the favorite. Only Luke of the four gospel writers tells it.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father.

It's not so far, that distance,
hidden here in my wayward heart,
seeking space from you,
and that righteous son of yours,
hungry for my own self-made place
beyond the borders I imagine,
the closed eye, the clenched hands.

It's not far at all, I can go there in a flash,
and do, daily.
What, even now, am I running from?
What am I never not looking for?

Oh, the things I could have used those wings for.

And yet.
In this far country I see your fingerprints.

You created this place, too. Nothing is outside you.
I can't escape you, can I?

No matter how I distance myself,
no matter how far the land,
how removed my heart,
I am not even in sight of your horizon.
I am in you.
I have never left the house.

Walk with me,
this long journey home.¹



But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

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I come into the room
calculating
what I've done,
as if hurt could be measured,
as if there was a score system,
as if we could say what I owe in return.

¹ Poem, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, www.unfoldinglight.net/ 3/21/22

² Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, 1606-1669. The Return of the Prodigal Son, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN

I come into the room
ready to apologize,
ready to make amends,
ready to tell you all the things I'll do to make it better,
but you put your arms around me.

Grace is the ocean
that softens the edges.
Grace is rain in the desert—
you're not sure whether to
laugh, cry, or dance.
Grace is a miracle,
all by itself.
In a scorekeeping world,
grace doesn't play by the rules.
I come into the room
calculating what I've done.
You say there's grace here.
It feels like a miracle.
I don't know whether to
laugh, cry, or dance.³



“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Firstborn child, son of my right hand,
how can I find you
if you were never lost?
How can I welcome you home
if you never left?

³ Poem, “What Doesn’t Play by the Rules,” by Sarah Speed. Artwork, “New in Christ,” by Lauren Wright Pittman. Both from “Full to the Brim,” *A Sanctified Art*, Lent 2022.

Have I regained one son
to lose another?
You are farther from me
than if you'd journeyed to the moon,
and your eyes more bitter than death.
A goat - is that really all you want from me?
But home isn't about things.
Family isn't a competition.
Why do you lock yourself out of love?
Who put a stone in place of your heart?



Your heart is not stone, but a seed,
wary and waiting.
I will rain tenderness on you,
warm you with the sunshine of my gaze,
gentle you in my arms,
until your shell splits
and my love seeps right to your core.
Your presence is all that's missing now.
Come on in.
Come on home.



This was Jesus' response to the self-righteous people who grumbled and condemned him for welcoming sinners, and eating with them. We proclaim Christ crucified, the wisdom and power of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Home.

I think no word in the English language is more emotionally charged.⁴ Home is family, familiarity, connection, safety, love, life. This is why the daily news of people fleeing their homes and their homeland breaks over us like a cold wave, threatening to pull us under, too. Circumstances compelled them to leave. The younger son of the father abandoned his native land by his own desire. His choices left him destitute. Without a home.



⁴ Yulia Vigrinyak cries as she holds her dog at a border crossing in Romania after fleeing Ukraine. *The Atlantic* Photo, 3/15/22

Until he came to himself. What does that mean? That he “hit bottom?” That he woke from the bad dream of his life? That he came to his senses? Or that he came to know himself?

But who knew him better than he knew himself? Who followed him to the far country? Who met him there? Who would not let him go, but kept knocking, even there among the pigs in the field? Who guided his bare, bloodied feet back along the road? Who turned his father’s eyes to see him there, limping home? Who filled his father’s heart with compassion?

Who but God? The God who never leaves us alone, who cannot leave us alone, because we are always in God. When he came to himself, he woke up to the nearness of God who had never abandoned him. And never would. And never will. Listen to these words of Madeleine L’Engle:

“To learn to love
is to be stripped of all love
until you are wholly without love.
Because
until you have gone
naked and afraid
into this cold dark place
where all love is taken from you
you will not know
that you are wholly within love.”⁵

Our home is in God. We are the ones who lock ourselves out.



We are like the little child who squeezes her eyes shut and covers them with her hands and says, “You can’t see me, God!”

We are like the person so afraid of God, he decides God had better not exist.

Or like the person so angry with God, they know God must be full of wrath and judgment.

Someone has said, “God’s love is like a fire - but unlike an earthly fire: the farther we distance ourselves from it, the more it burns.”⁶ And God’s fire, as we get closer, only warms and heals, forgives and connects, draws us nearer to the center of God’s heart, closer to each other.

Some say Jesus himself was the younger son, who undertook the long journey into a world of woe, and there lost everything, including his life. “My God, my God,” he cried, “Why have you forsaken me?” Though in truth he was never forsaken or forgotten by the One who sent him.

⁵ Madeleine L’Engle, “The Birth of Love.” Retrieved from the internet 3/26/22.

⁶ Paraphrased from *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, edited by C.S. Lewis. P. 99.

Some say death is the longest journey, the unbridgeable chasm between ourselves and those we love. But death is really just the necessary next step to the most joyful reunion of all.

As I was writing these words, I got the call saying Margaret had died. All I could think was, “She’s gone home at last.” She is safe in the arms of love, in the heart of God, the place she lived every day of her life. She is more at home now than ever. “Death is not extinguishing the light, it’s turning out the lamp because the dawn has come.” (Rabindranath Tagore)

But we don’t need to die to be at home in God. As Dorothy learned in the land of Oz, we only need to remember, “There’s no place like home,” no home we need more than God.



So many in the world need, right this moment, to come to themselves, to have their stony hearts split open, to find themselves in God. Maybe you can think of someone who has locked themselves out of love, in a far country. Let’s take a moment in silence to hold them now in the Light and warmth of God. And then let’s make sure they have an earthly home, too.

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⁷ Mother and child of Ukraine, resting in a train station en route to Poland. *The Atlantic Photo*, March 23, 2022.

Prayers

Gracious God, you are our home, and your love is our place of deepest belonging. We want to come home to you. Where our hearts are stony, soften them toward one another, so that we may truly celebrate and rejoice together at our homecoming.

Too many in our world have left their homes, running for their lives from aggression, famine, hardship or hate. Help us understand what it is to lose all that is familiar, and reach out with compassion and care. We pray for parents, working so hard to adopt three Ukrainian children; bless their efforts. We give thanks for a friend in Germany, who has taken a Ukrainian family into her home. Strengthen all those who are trying hard to bring hope into a desperate situation.

As our own lives go forward day by day, give us understanding and acceptance of those who differ from us. Heal the sick and injured, and those suffering from covid and other illness, befriend the lonely, give courage to those who struggle, soothe the dying, comfort those who mourn, especially all those who knew and loved Margaret. Bring us all home in good time to you and teach us to pray, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name....