

Sermon Draft for March 30, 2025

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

Sermon: “Welcome Home”

Our message is taken from one of three well known parables in the 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel often known as the parables of “Lost Things.” Today’s text is very familiar, the story of the prodigal son. Was this story truly about the younger son? Or was it about the older son or maybe the father. When we look at all three parable from Luke we could conclude it’s about the Father seeking the lost but let’s get back to our parable this morning, the prodigal son.

Have you ever wondered what life would have been like for the prodigal son after the celebration. I am not talking about the next day, or the next month, or even the next year. I am curious about the long-term impact of his wandering. As far as the parable goes, his part ended well. He received his father’s love, forgiveness, and celebration. But was he ever tempted to wander again?

Jesus does not tell us. This does not seem to have been His point. He was indeed focused on the father. He told the parable to outcasts and elites alike (verses 1-3) to help them grasp the longsuffering grace of God. But still, Jesus' use of story ignites our imagination, especially since congregations are filled with people who, to one degree or another, identify with the prodigal son. And the imagination does not turn off immediately. Perhaps that was intentional too. Which brings me back to my wondering.

What would life have been like for that younger son after his return? The social sciences and personal experience teach us wounds lead to scars. Mistakes carry lingering consequences. Post-traumatic stress resurfaces years later. Pastoral ministry teaches wayward members who return to church are not immune from temptations to drift again. After the thrill of reengagement, it is common for old habits to reemerge. Prone to wander, Lord, we feel it.

Rudyard Kipling felt it too. In his poem, called The Prodigal Son (1901), he offers an imaginative meditation on the now returned prodigal son. Here is how the poem begins:

***Here come I to my own again,
Fed, forgiven and known again,
Claimed by bone of my bone again
And cheered by flesh of my flesh.***

Notice how the poem starts with a welcome home. The young son is grateful to be back among his own people. He is cheered to be “fed, forgiven, and known again.” But Kipling’s version of his story does not end happily ever after.

***The fatted calf is dressed for me,
But the husks have greater zest for me,
I think my pigs will be best for me,
So, I’m off to the Yards afresh.
I never was very refined, you see,
(And it weighs on my brother’s mind, you see)
But there’s no reproach among swine, d’you see,
For being a bit of a swine.***

Despite the forgiveness and familiarity, he found at home, the younger son had a yearning. The siren song of his previous life called to him. What made it so tempting? Because he was still a bit of a swine. Which picks up on an important theme in the Christian life. It is a theme that comes into sharper focus during Lent.

Christians are at the same time sinner and saint. Baptized and forgiven, we have been restored to the family. We are home with our Father. We have returned to life with our siblings.

But the sinful nature still clings. Sinful longings still stir. Familiarity breeds contempt. Life away from home does not look so bad months and years removed, especially when compared to the mundane realities of the responsible life. The older son's experience is not far off.

***My father glooms and advises me,
My brother sulks and despises me,
And Mother catechizes me
Till I want to go out and swear.
We have returned to life with our siblings. But the sinful nature
still clings.***

Kipling's prodigal son has begun to bristle against life at home. Restless, resistant to paternal instruction, beset by sibling rivalry, he makes his decision. Life in the home was nice, especially after hitting rock bottom. But he would not be a kept man.

***So, I'm off with wallet and staff to eat
The bread that is three parts chaff to wheat,
But glory be! – there's a laugh to it,
Which isn't the case when we dine.
I'm leaving, Pater. Good-bye to you!
God bless you, Mater! I'll write to you!
I wouldn't be impolite to you,
But, Brother, you are a hound!***

The young son's second farewell is less acrimonious than his first. He is a little gentler, a little more grateful to his parents, but not much more. And there is no love lost for his brother.

There is a metric playfulness to Kipling's poem which is both delightful and disturbing. It almost sings, but it also devastates. He so easily leaves home again. Does he not value his father's forgiveness? Did he ever truly receive it? Has he learned nothing?

Are sibling rivalries so deep? How could he so quickly abandon all that is good in his life back home?

These questions are not only theoretical. At some point, they confront every Christian who has experienced the loving forgiveness of God. The thrill of God's grace fades and the slow march toward the cross dulls the heart.

At such times, the former life beckons. Remember we are both sinner and saint. We sin daily in our thoughts, words and deeds and of course there is the sin of omission. How many times do we not speak up or speak a kind word to someone in need?

How many times are we just too busy to help someone in need, even at church? Yes, even though we know what we are to do, sometimes the temptation to sit back and say nothing and do nothing is strong. As Paul wrote, the things I want to do I do not do and the things I don't want to do I keep on doing. The temptations to wonder and return to our old ways are strong, our sinful ways.

This is why Lent is an important annual exercise.

As we continue the season with this familiar parable, Kipling's imaginative expansion of this parable can warn us against devaluing the love and forgiveness of our heavenly Father.

We may be growing restless, weary of the mundane relationships and responsibilities of life in the Church. After all we are all sinners and saints at the same time. Even as we love the Lord, we also despise Him. Even as we have reconciled with our brothers and sisters, we still bristle at the thought of them. Even as we willingly receive instruction from God and the Church, we have an independent streak desiring to rebel. Prone to wander, indeed.

But thankfully Christ calls us back, especially during the season of Lent. But even during Lent, a time of repentance our message is so much more as we share the unconditional promise of our heavenly Father's love in Christ. He still calls us to Himself. He still runs out to us with open arms. He still forgives and feeds.

Amen