

Gospel: Where Home Seeks You

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

How many times do we hear it said, something like: *You make your own luck*. Or... *You made your bed, now you sleep in it!* Parents teach their kids That they need to work to find success in life. It seems that a variation of this truism is given too much credence; If one is not successful, then it is our fault. While it is true to a certain extent, Jesus brought a decidedly different spiritual message about the economics of God's love and grace that offends people in ancient and in modern times with its extravagance.¹

Our reading today opens with the Pharisees and teachers grumbling about how Jesus is socializing with people they judge as sinners. Jesus responds by doing what he does best, telling stories. He tells a string of 3 parables, each one about lost things found.

Imagine that you have a hundred sheep, Jesus says, but one goes missing. What would you do? Wouldn't you leave the 99 to find the one? And then wouldn't you have a party? So also there will be celebrating in heaven when one person changes their wayward ways.

A woman has 10 coins, but loses one. She looks everywhere for that little coin, eventually finds it, and is so happy that she invites the neighbours and has a party.

Then the parable of the prodigal. Jesus uses boys in the story, but I wonder what difference it makes making it two sisters instead. I'll stick with the father, and explain why in a moment.

So, the youngest of two sisters decides that she wants to live life, now. She asks her dad, "Father, I would like my inheritance now." "Now, before I'm dead?" asks her dad. "Yes, now." She replies. Insulting to say the least, but the father gives her the land. She sells the land, takes the money, and as the King James Translation puts it – squanders everything on "riotous living." She spent the whole inheritance, and ends up in work that would have made Jewish listeners of Jesus' parable wretch - she cleans up after pigs, and is so desperate she eats their food. Things are terrible, and finally comes to her senses and goes home.

Think of a time or several instances when you did something really terrible. You broke something very special, like the family car. Or you lost grandma's priceless heirloom. You know the folks are going to hit the roof, soooo mad. You practice your speech in your head all the way home. You think your heart is going to come out of your chest it is thumping like a bass drum. Well this is the experience of the prodigal, sheepishly going home.

Except... when you get to the end of the driveway, Dad is racing out to meet you; you are stunned as you notice that he is happy to see you. In the Jewish culture that Jesus grew up in, a father would not do this. Would the mother go racing out to greet the

¹ Daniel G. Deffenbaugh. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. "Theological Perspective"

prodigal child? Maybe. There are rules, cultural norms that told parents not to carry on this way.

What is Jesus teaching people, rewarding bad behaviour? Both the father and the prodigal child broke numerous cultural rules...and Jesus flagrantly disregards the religious laws when he spends time with, even eats with, the riff raff.

Franciscan scholar Leslie Hoppe clarifies Jesus' take on it all:

The reconciliation between the father and the younger son did not occur because of what the son did, but because of what the father did.²

We resonate with these parables of Jesus even 2000 years later, because the we can relate to one of the characters in them. But the greatest power at the heart of Jesus' teaching is in his blatant inability to follow the rules of the world around him. He sticks to the fundamentals of his childhood faith, Judaism, that no matter how badly God's children behave, God makes a commitment to God's people and sticks to it...even when the people behave badly, even offending their Creator.

God's children, we, might not be seeking God as we muck about in life, making terrible decisions at times. Our world is full of people who feel at some level displaced. Many in our world literally live in exile, because of war or systemic injustice in our world - they are seeking "home" for their families and themselves. Sometimes, though, exile is a direct result of our own doing. We cast ourselves into spiritual, psychological or perhaps literal exile because we buy into the messages that our world sells; we try to buy "home", or earn or achieve it.

The funny thing about the way Jesus teaches is that it seems that there are very real limits on our ability to seek and find the wholeness only our Creator can give. But there is absolutely, positively no limit on God's capacity to reach out and to envelope us in love. Remember Jesus meeting that rich young man who followed all the laws, but Jesus told him that he needed to let go of his possessions and he just couldn't...couldn't let go of his material crutches in order to understand what God's kin-dom is truly about.

I have had to let go of the spiritual crutches numerous times, waiting for God, waiting for "home" to find me, come to meet me. Moments of crisis that serve also as moments of opportunity because we have nothing left to lose. Twenty years ago, I had finished three disastrous years of ministry; I had made a move to Kingston, was working 2 contract jobs. I had a sense of security, though I was making minimum wage. Then the bottom fell out from under me: my living situation that was wonderfully steady became suddenly precarious, and I got a notice from Revenue Canada telling me that I had not filed proper income tax for two contract jobs. I owed thousands of dollars, and didn't have it. In my darkest hour I remember a friend, a Roman Catholic chaplain from the prison system, calling me, and insisting that I needed to come to supper with him. His humour and empathy embraced me that evening.

God's Grace can sometimes be like that. Sometimes when we will not cut ourselves some slack, or forgive ourselves for something terrible that we did. God's love can

² Fr Leslie J. Hoppe. Ibid. Exegetical Perspective.

sneak up on us, through its warmth around us and remind us that we are not so alone as we thought. I remember the Alzahrn family arriving in Capreol. Refugees from Syria, they were so thankful to Canada and particularly to Justin Trudeau for his commitment to refugees. Whatever your politics or mine, and putting aside recent issues, you should need to imagine the gratitude felt by a family who may never again see their Syrian home...but who now call Canada, proudly, their home; Canadians their family.

Jesus in Luke's Gospel offends the people who value rule and order. People who make terrible choices, live raucous lives, are not redeemable and *certainly not cost-effective* according to the economics of love and redemption in many minds. Changing one life or heart is priceless to God according to Jesus. It is a risky operation – leaving 99 sheep unattended. A shepherd among the listeners might say that is irresponsible. That prodigal child perhaps should have gotten some tough love.

It's only a story, after all. Maybe it's not realistic...until that prodigal is you, or me, or someone we love very much, or maybe a stranger on the street asking for money... Then...maybe we might see that person in a whole new light; seeing that person just as God sees them - worth all the love you can give them. Amen.