

4 Lent, Year C
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Luke 15:11-32

A friend of mine is a scholar of early American history. His specialty is colonial New England, and he has a particular interest in the day to day lives of colonial New Englanders. He tells me that the homes of these settlers were usually very simple and plain, with little if anything on the walls for decoration, except for an occasional map. But if a house had a piece of artwork on the wall, it was most often a depiction of the return of the prodigal son – by far and away, this was the most popular piece of art that anyone would have on their walls, if they had anything.

A map or a depiction of this parable – both ways of finding our way home.

For many and various reasons, this parable strikes a chord in us. We see ourselves in the parable, and something tells us that we see God, also.

When we hear of an effusively loving God as expressed in a parable like this, we have an ineffable flash of recognition. Yes, our hearts say, this is the truth about God – not One who is swift to chide and slow to bless, but just the opposite. One who is eagerly awaiting our return, if only we would come to our senses, One who has no thought of punishment but who only anticipates the joy of embracing us again and welcoming us home. “Yes,” our hearts say, “here is the truth about God.” It is the same sense of recognition Christians have upon looking at the cross – this is the truth about God.

Our practical, sensible and judging self knows that such unconditional love and welcome and forgiveness is impractical. Our minds know that this is an invitation to lawlessness and loose living. Our mind knows that this sort of no-consequences-for-misbehavior is no way to run a family, and surely it is no way to run a universe. So we very often adopt a theology of God that makes more practical sense to us (and that makes more sense to the older brother in the parable, of course).

But still, deep inside, our hearts experience something peculiar upon hearing this parable. It's something deeper than our mind or our reason can grasp – we have a flash of recognition that is born of faith, hope and love, when we hear Jesus speak of a Prodigal Father, not a Practical Father. We know from reason and experience that we are prodigiously sinful like the prodigal son. And we know by faith, hope and love that God is even more prodigal in his love than we are prodigal in our selfishness; God is more lavish and extravagant and prodigious in his forgiveness than we are in our recklessness and sinfulness. Something speaks in our hearts and says, “Yes, this is the truth about God.”

But we naturally start with what we know about ourselves. We know that there are times in all our lives when we wander from God, simply because we are not paying attention. We don't mean to go astray at times like that, we just don't have our spiritual life as a

priority because there are so many other pressing concerns in our lives. So, in tending to these other things, we forget the most important thing, and we wander off the path of spiritual attentiveness. We didn't mean to do it; we just stopped paying attention and ended up wandering far from God.

At other times, though, we're much more willful about straying from God. Like the prodigal son, we know full well what we're doing – we're leaving because we want to leave! The temptations of the world are too strong; the lure of wealth is too attractive; the feeling that we can be freer and in greater control of our lives – doing what I want to do when I want to do it – this is too invigorating.

And so we, like the younger son, grab what we can and wander off to create our own life. In the language of theology, we become full of hubris. We are puffed up with exaggerated pride and self-confidence. And although this exhilarating state can last quite a long time for many people – some even go to their graves in this state of selfish aggrandizement – most of us discover sooner or later that we have wandered far into a land that is waste.

Our bubble bursts. We know that something is deeply wrong. It was invigorating for a while, all the things we have been able to buy, all the things we have been able to do, all the places we have been able to go, ...but now we feel lost.

A colleague of mine once said, "You know, the man who is knocking on the door of the house of ill repute is really a man looking for God. He's just knocking on the wrong door." Because what that man is really saying is this, "Please love me. Someone, please love me just as I am, with all of my terrible faults, with all of my imperfections. Just love me as I am, if only for one hour." And it works – for an hour. But it never lasts.

This is a time when many are plunged into a kind of depression, as they come to terms with the emptiness of their lives. But depression is not always simply a sign that something is wrong. Depression can also be a kind of wake up call. Because the deepest truth about this moment in our lives, this moment when we realize how lost and empty we are, the deepest truth is that we are at a moment of Grace. Something can happen now that perhaps could not have happened before. Because God is now close, and our hearts are now vulnerable.

The prodigal son perceived it. As the Gospel lesson says, the younger son "came to himself" as he sat there among the pigs and realized that he was not a pig. He was a human being. He was a human being with a Father. And he made a decision.

When Jesus says that the younger son "came to himself," perhaps this is what he meant. The younger son came to his true identity and decided to return to that identity. This is the reason Martin Luther once advised his flock that the first thing a Christian should do in the morning before getting out of bed is make the sign of the cross – that is, remind yourself of who you are, because throughout the day ahead, there will be many

opportunities to forget. Make the sign of the cross as a reminder that you are a child of God who has been marked as Christ's own forever.

This is just a way of coming to yourself, remembering that you belong to someone who is recklessly in love with you, One who knows all your sins and still loves you beyond your imagination. The day ahead is not the day you have made. It is the day the Lord has made. And it is your role to rejoice and be glad in it, as you live a life befitting your true identity.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of three parables in the 15th chapter of Luke that demonstrate various ways we might stray from God and become lost. There's the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and then this parable of the prodigal son. These parables show that there are several different ways we might get lost, but they also show that God's response to our being lost is consistent.

In the parable of the lost sheep, He leaves the 99 and goes after the one that is lost until he finds it. In the parable of the lost coin, the woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house diligently until she finds it. And in the parable of the prodigal son, it seems clear that the Father has kept the front door light on, that he's been watching out the window every day, because while the son was still at a distance, the Father ran and breathlessly embraced him.

All three parables about our propensity to become lost demonstrate God's restlessness until we are found. God doesn't sit still when we wander off.

And God's response to our leaving Him doesn't end with his restless seeking us out and welcoming us home. In all three parables, there is a sense of urgency about having a party – calling friends and neighbors to celebrate. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” And, “Quickly, bring the best robe, put a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet, bring the fatted calf ... let us eat and make merry.”

Now if we think about it, this is the really amazing part about being a Christian. God responds very differently from the way we would respond in situations like this. Think, for example, about what would happen when a wayward and unruly child returned to one of our homes. He's totaled the car, and run up the Visa card; he's spiked his hair purple and green, and his body is pierced in the weirdest places. What would happen?

Well, he'd be **grounded**, of course. He'd *at least* be on probation. But we surely would not pull out the best single malt scotch and invite the neighbors over for a party! This kid would have to prove himself again, and that would take time! We know that. And the older son in the parable knows that, too. That's why he refused to join in the party – it's not appropriate.

It's not appropriate, but it's the Gospel. The Gospel is that God is so hopelessly, recklessly and prodigiously in love with you that, even though you continue to stray and

misbehave, God has no sense of propriety, no need to punish, just a strong need to have you join in the joyful celebration of your life with Him.

This kind of thing drove people crazy in Jesus' day, and it still does today. No standards! Anything goes! No consequences or accountability! But there's every reason to believe that the thing that will keep many people out of the Kingdom of God is simply our refusal to enter, just like the older son, because we are offended by this irresponsible teaching about God's love and embrace of certain kinds of people. We'll keep ourselves out of the Kingdom, because it's just not right.

So, why shouldn't we go on sinning and misbehaving and selfishly feasting? Why not, if God is going to love us and rejoice over us anyway? Why not, if the last people hired are going to get paid the same as the first who had been slaving away obediently all day? Why not just go on selfishly living it up, do whatever I want to do?

The answer is, "You're free to do that." The Gospel only comes by way of invitation, never by threat or command. If you want to wander off and squander it all in lavish living, you can do that, and you'll probably have fun... for a while. But the exhilaration and prestige that come with such a life never ultimately satisfy. Never. And perhaps the only hope is that one day you'll come to yourself and realize, "I have been living like a pig. But I am a human, a child of God. I know what I will do. I will return to my true home."

In the parable of the prodigal son, we have a map for doing just that.