

“Come Home”
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
Sermon, 4/7/2019

“If you are going to preach on that Prodigal Son story, let me know in advance. I dislike that story so much, I wish it were not in the Bible. I don’t want to be there if that is your text.” In an unusual moment of honesty, believe it or not, a member of a former congregation came to see me with this exact message. Pursuing her comments, I discovered she had been alienated from her sister for a good number of years, due to some over-exaggerated event. At the time of the disagreement they both had vowed to go to their graves harboring the hurt and anger. There was a reason the woman did not want to ever hear the story again. It was too much of a challenge for her to do so.

Perhaps, an even more bothersome story was that of Jack, who I came to love and respect. When first arriving at the church of which he been a member since birth, some well-intentioned parishioner advised me to not visit him. “It would only upset you and him.” “Well, can you tell me something about why you say that?” It turned out that Jack was even then one of the biggest givers to the Church budget and that his wife never missed a church service and had remained deeply involved it its life. Some years before I arrived, he and another member had a quarrel and Jack vowed he would never again set foot in the church.

Not being one to avoid a difficult situation, I thanked the woman for her advice, and went promptly to see Jack. We immediately hit it off. He willingly shared how angry he was with the other person, and subsequently with the church. What struck me was he did not tell me who the other person was or what the disagreement was about. He spoke in general terms, rather than specifics. Do you care to guess why?

I told him it might be easier for me to understand if I knew the whole story. To this day, the conversation that followed floors me.

“I cannot tell you the whole story, because I don’t remember it.”

“If you can’t remember it, how can it still upset you?”

“I don’t know, but it must have been something bad for me to still be this angry.”

“I personally love the story. It speaks to me every time I hear it. Please preach on it sometime soon.” These words came from a different member of the congregation.

This man had abused drugs and alcohol as a teenager, had left home at seventeen and had no contact with his family again until he was twenty-five, when one of his brothers located him and shared the news of his father's impending death. With coaxing and support from his brother, he went to see his father at the hospital. His father reached out to him, assured him he was loved and welcomed him home, where all would be forgiven.

Yet one more true story! It is of the woman who once told me that the Prodigal Son story always made her wonder if she could be that forgiving? She asked about herself: "If my child treated me as badly as the son in the story do, how could I ever forgive her?"

This story, these stories reach us. At different times, it reaches us in different ways. Sometimes, we resonate with the younger son, knowing how we wanted what was coming to us, impatient to let life unfold without much of an effort. At times we identify with the father, pained and grief stricken that someone he loves has betrayed him, who even so feels an emptiness that can only be filled by a reconciliation. And at times, we empathize with the older brother, who has dutifully fulfilled what has been expected. Like him, we want our reward, our recognition.

No matter where you are, which character speaks the loudest to you at this moment? Is it the character embedded in this story, but not mentioned? Is it God who speaks in, and through, the characters mentioned? Is it the one who calls us to see from different perspectives, from whatever vantage place in which we find ourselves?

To those of us who identify with the younger son, recognizing the distance we have put between ourselves and others, furthering our own wants over and above others, recognizing how far we have moved from true community with our human family, God speaks. ***Come home, seek forgiveness, and be reunited with me. Give me the chance to say: Quickly turn out a robe - the best one - and put it on her, put a ring on her finger and sandals on her feet.***

To those who identify with the father, tapping the love that resides deeply in every one of us, who knows that reconciliation is the only way back to wholeness, who knows that holding on to hurt simply deepens the hurt and makes reunion less possible, God speaks. ***Move from pain into unmitigated joy. Move from sorrow to celebration. Move from death into life. Enjoy the reality of resurrection. 'For this my child was dead and is alive again, was lost, and now is found.'***

To those who identify with the older brother, feeling used and unappreciated, feeling self-righteous, joyless and know the burden of caring for someone, but not the blessing, God speaks. ***Your love is not in vain. Love is never the wrong answer. Caring may be tough, but it is still right. Even in your estrangement, I have not forgotten you nor stopped loving you. ‘...you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.’***

It is truly an ***amazing grace*** that speaks to us, reshapes and redirects is.

It is truly an ***amazing grace*** that speaks to each and every one of us.

I know how you have used others. I know how you have put your wants ahead of the needs of others. I know all of that, but yet, I still make the offer.

Softly 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. Come home, come home...

I know how you struggle to forgive and accept. I know there is reason to believe love cannot overcome your hurt and pain, but yet I call to you.

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me? Why should we linger and heed not his mercies...Come home, come home.

I know how deeply it hurts to feel used and unappreciated. I know how it feels to think no one understands your experience, but even so, I do.

O for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me...Come home, come home; you who are weary...come home. A truly amazing grace awaits. Come home, come home.