

Welcome Home

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So even though I have been living in Auburn for over a month, there are still moving boxes and things are *still* not quite where they are supposed to be. And there are absolutely no pictures hung on the wall (we'll get there). But I think that was maybe the reason I looked around the other day and was filled with kind of this wave of homesickness. That feeling, like a small child sometimes, where you just, *I just want to go home*. But I wasn't quite sure where home was. I've moved so often that it's kind of hard to put my finger on. Where is home?

It's not Arizona where I was born, and my family has since moved from my family home in Altoona. My dad lives in Sioux Falls, but I didn't grow up there. And, you know, maybe it's Chicago where I went to seminary; or Lincoln, where I went to college; or Florida where I was an intern; or Superior where I just was.... Or, you know, there's a lot of places I could call home. And yet, sometimes none of them quite feel like home.

It'll take time.

I know from moving so often, eventually this will feel like home. I know it will, so nobody get nervous. This will feel like home for a long time, but I know I'm not alone in that feeling. I think, *especially right now*, I can point to a lot of other people who don't feel at home. People who are fleeing war and famine and climate change. People experiencing homelessness. Even

people who have lived in one place for their whole entire life can still feel out of place in new groups and new situations.

In this world, that can be so lonely and isolating—in this new quasi post-COVID era that's not nearly as similar to pre-COVID as we had hoped—we can feel not *quite* at home. And this is the experience of so many of God's people. Whether it's Adam and Eve kicked out of Eden, or Abraham wandering. Joseph, as he is sent over to Egypt. The people in the desert as they wander towards the promised land, as the Northern kingdom is exiled to Assyria and, later, the Southern kingdom exiled to Babylon. God's people seem like they are always yearning for home.

And so now in Jesus' time, they've returned to the land. They've returned from Babylon, but it still doesn't quite feel like home because Rome is in charge and not their own king. So the Pharisees are here blaming the sinners a bit, the common people, the ones who don't keep the law nearly as rigorously as they do. *If only they did the right things, then God would favor us again.* And the common people blame the religious elite, the ones who are taking all the money and selling them out to Rome.

In our gospel of Luke, Jesus is not really taking sides between these two groups. Yes, he eats with sinners and tax collectors, but he also eats with the Pharisees. Yes, he critiques the Pharisees and the other religious leaders, but he also critiques the sinners.

So here in this parable—the one that theologians call the gospel *within* the gospel—maybe Jesus will settle this for us. How will the people return home?

There's a man with two sons, Jesus says. (Let's be honest: they are **not** great sons). The younger says, *Oh, why are you taking so long to die? Can I just have my money now?* And the father says, *Okay*, and sends him off. So he goes off and has a great time with the money until it runs out. And then he has a pretty terrible time.

Almost every time I've heard this story, this is the point where it becomes a story about how we are supposed to repent and return to God. Have we heard that story before? How this is about repentance and the journey home? But I looked a little more closely this time, and I don't think this younger son actually repents at all. He says, *I am starving. You know, who has food? My dad! How do I get back to my dad?*

Jesus is making a connection with this story to the story of Jacob, that trickster younger son who steals an inheritance from his brother, Esau. Do you remember this story? And then [Jacob] goes off to a far land? So Jesus' audience would know, *maybe it's a little bit of a trickster story*. They might also recognize a familiar phrase: *I have sinned against God and against you*. Pharaoh says that to Moses, as he asks him to take away the locusts, and we know exactly how sincere Pharaoh was.

So, this younger son has a plan to come home in disgrace, having spent all of his inheritance and ASK FOR MORE

MONEY. He asks for his father to hire him as a hired hand. It is pretty shameless, and yet his father still loves him and wants to be in relationship with him again, so he runs to go meet him. Met by this incredible show of selfless love, the younger brother is transformed. He drops his demands and just allows himself to be reconciled to this father who never stopped loving him. He exiled himself from the father in pursuit of everything else and—even as he gets to the edge of this village that he grew up in—he is still far off. And then the father runs to him and the younger son comes home.

The Pharisees said, *This fellow Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners.* So Jesus tells them the parable of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and the lost son: stories of things that are far off until God comes near. Not waiting for them to repent but coming to find them anyway, because God loves them.

The story's not over though, because the younger son is not the only one who is far from home. If home is where the heart is, then the older son has been very far indeed in the heart of his loving father. Even from this very short story, we know about the father's love and how easily he bestows it. And yet the older son—who has been living there his whole entire life—sees his father as an exacting taskmaster who gives to others who do not deserve it.

We call this story The Prodigal Son or The Wasteful Son, but it is the *older* son who has wasted his time, trying to earn a love his father gives for free. Even now—as he calls the father to reproach—the father says, *all I have is yours.* The son with his rules and his work has exiled himself from the heart of the

father, and *again*—before he repents, while he is still far off—here comes the father with open arms. And this amazing love invites the older son into relationship and into transformation as well.

So here is the verdict of this parable. How will the people return home? Jesus says, *home comes to you. God's heart is running after you both, to those who don't carry out the rituals and those who do. To those who waste their time and those who waste their money, when they could have God's extravagant love for free.* Jesus is saying, *God saves both of you without any effort from you at all.*

The open-endedness of this parable leaves a question for the older son, and for the Pharisees, and for us: how will we live in response to this amazing, wasteful, *extravagant* love?

There's also this is the season of Lent. We talk about repentance a lot, and there is a time to repent. There is a time to live into the kingdom of heaven. There is a time to live a life closer to the one that Jesus calls us to. But today—as we hear the gospel within the gospel, the good news in the midst of good news—we don't hear law. We hear that, when we are still far off, God comes to us when we are sure that we can fix all our own problems, *thank you very much.* God runs to us when we are full of judgment against others. God says, *all I have is yours before* we are good enough, **before** we have it altogether. Before we even know we are lost, here comes God chasing us with open arms. And this selfless love that frees captives, leads people to the promised land, ends exiles, and *never* stopped searching for the lost.

Today and always, this love says *welcome home*.

Thanks be to God.