

Sermon, 4 Lent C

Luke 15:11-32

Preached Sunday, March 18, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Just about everyone I know has run away from home — or at least given it serious consideration. My day came when I was 12 years old. We had just moved to a new town. At the beginning of Christmas break in the middle of sixth grade, I had said good-bye to my friends and my school. And at the end of the holiday, I was meeting new classmates and trying to get comfortable in a new school and new neighborhood. Suffice it to say, it was not going very well.

Our family had been forced to move because my father had taken a new job. Naturally, I blamed my parents for my miserable plight. I would say to myself things like, “If only I could have had nice parents — parents who would never have played such a cruel trick on their poor, innocent son.” All of this came to a head one day. I don’t remember how it started, but I had a rip-roaring argument with — I think — every member of my family. I yelled, I screamed, and I lamented how unfair it all was. Then, I locked myself in the bathroom and refused to come out. For a long time. My parents tried talking to me; they tried ignoring me; they tried calling me to supper — all to no avail. I wanted to make them sorry for forcing me to move when I was in the middle of sixth grade!!

After hours in the bathroom, I decided it was time to leave my terrible, unloving family. So I crawled out the window and walked away. I was very proud of my bold decision. It turned out, however, that there were a few drawbacks. Right away, I noticed how cold I was without a jacket. But I couldn’t go back and face my family, so I kept walking. About a block later, I realized how hungry I was, with no way to get myself fed. A block or two after that, I realized I didn’t have any place to sleep that night. It took another three or four blocks for me to come to my senses. I was just a cold, hungry, angry 12 year-old kid with no place to go. With a newly-discovered meekness, I realized that swallowing my pride was sounding better all the time. So, I went home. I don’t remember what my family did or said, exactly. But I’m pretty sure they played it cool. They didn’t belittle me, they didn’t scold; but they didn’t make a big fuss, either. “Oh, there you are. Welcome back. We left a plate of food for you in the oven.”

People probably leave home for any number of reasons — some of them quite valid. But I have a hunch that, for a lot of us, we run away from home when we come to believe that the status quo is no longer tolerable. We convince ourselves that we deserve better, that there must be greener pastures in some other place. And, once we begin to look down our noses at our home, our family, our community, it becomes too hard to change course. So we don’t swallow our pride, and we strike out on our own.

In my case, I was just 12 years old. I had little ability to carry out my threat. But older people can and do — and some of them never go back. And some are still trying to find a place to call home.

The prodigal son had to “come to himself” before he finally went home. When he was still spending his father’s money, he wasn’t thinking about what he had left behind. But after the money ran out, and the pig slops started looking tasty, *he came to himself*. He woke up and remembered who he was and where he belonged. He had a history; a family with a father who loved him. They were waiting for him in a familiar place — the place that helped make him who he was — the very place he once thought he couldn’t tolerate.

Every time I hear this story, I am amazed at the response of the father. His behavior is so extraordinary that some have suggested this should be re-named “The Profligate Father.” Profligate is the only word that begins to describe the irrationally extravagant forgiveness that he

lavishes upon his wayward son. One author was struck by this same quality: “The father didn’t cross-examine the boy, bully him, lecture him on ingratitude, or insist on any high motivation [for his return]. He was so overjoyed at the sight of his son that he ignored all the canons of parental discretion and simply welcomed him back home. The father took him back just as he was.”*

It’s helpful for me to remember what prompted Jesus to tell this story in the first place. Beforehand, the Pharisees were at it again — criticizing him for hanging around with tax collectors and other notorious sinners. Jesus responds with the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the Profligate Father. In each case, there is rejoicing in heaven and on earth. It’s not the time to place blame or wag fingers or preach moralistic sermons. It’s not the time to wallow in guilt and a sense of unworthiness — which is what the prodigal son was prepared to do, but his father wouldn’t hear of it. It’s not the time to talk about injustices and harbor resentment, which is what the Pharisaical older brother wanted to do. When a lost soul finds his or her spiritual home, it’s time to celebrate and throw a party. God’s joyful embrace is immediate, complete and overwhelming: “This [child] of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (v. 24).

We don’t have to squander an inheritance or wander far in a strange land to experience this extravagant and reckless love. It can happen after we’ve strayed just a little off-course or grown lukewarm in our relationship with God in Christ. It can happen when we realize that we haven’t treated others — or even ourselves — with the respect and dignity that Jesus modeled for us. It can happen after we’ve found ourselves questioning God’s existence or losing the will to live in the face of heavy burdens.

The overwhelmingly good news of the Gospel is that God is scanning the horizon, watching for our return. In Christ, God is waiting to embrace us unconditionally, no matter how we became separated from the love that is our true and eternal home.

Paul Tillich is one of the most renowned theologians of the 20th Century. He also was a great preacher, bringing his vast insights to bear on the Gospel. In a sermon on grace, he explains this profound concept in disarmingly simple terms: “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It is as if a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted ... by that which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now.... Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. [For now,] simply accept the fact that you are accepted.’”**

There’s a story from Spain about a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched and searched for months, but without success. Finally, in a last ditch effort to find him, the father put a classified ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read as follows: “Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.”

On that Saturday at the newspaper office, the father watched in awe and gratitude as his son came to be reconciled to him and return home. But so did hundreds of other young men named Paco, all looking for forgiveness and love.***

This is the message that comes to us especially in the wilderness of Lent: “Wake up. Remember who you are. Remember who loves you with the same reckless and unconditional love that created the universe. Cease your aimless yearning and wandering. **Come home.**”

*Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 1990, p. 182. **“You Are Accepted” from *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 1955. ****Bits & Pieces*, October 15, 1992, p. 13.