

Coming Home

Preached on Trinity 3
Trinity Anglican church
June 28, 2020
Text: Luke 15: 1-10

The Epistle is written in the eighth chapter of the letter of blessed Paul to the Romans beginning at the 18th verse. During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated, what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” The people at the conference eventually had to agree.

The idea of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct we have. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law—all of these offer a way to earn approval. Only Christianity shows us that God’s love is unconditional. But we live in a world of ungrace. “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” “Why should they get this help? Nobody helped me.” “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” Is it any wonder that God’s grace is often hard for us to fathom, and that Jesus talked to us about it so often?

A housewife jumping up and down in glee over the discovery of a lost coin is not what naturally comes to mind when we think of God. Yet that is the image Jesus insisted upon. We see this, after all, in a string of three parables by Jesus—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son—two of which we read earlier, but all of them of a piece. Each underscores a loss of something important, describes the thrill of finding it, and ends with a scene of jubilation. Jesus says in effect, “Do you want to know what it feels like to be God? When a person repents and turns to Me, it feels like I just reclaimed my most valuable possession, which I had given up for lost.” In Luke, right before the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus says in verse 10: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And the church should be a place of rejoicing as well. Let’s keep that in mind as we take a look at our passage this morning. Chapter 15 begins with this: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” This prompts Jesus to tell three parables that highlight God’s extreme grace as opposed to the Pharisees’ extreme ungrace. In essence, Jesus is saying, “You think you know God, but you do not. God doesn’t play by your rules. Here is what God is all about.”

Though the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin provide a good introduction to God’s strong desire for us, the parable of the Prodigal Son brings home the point with greater power. In the story, the father represents God the Father. He has two sons. One of these sons is called the “older” and the other the “younger”. The boys grow up living in a very nice home, a home with everything they could want—love, security, comfort. Yet

this younger son wants more. So he decides that he no longer wants to be a part of this home; rather, he thinks the grass is greener somewhere else. So the father allows him to exercise his freedom of choice. The father divides up his estate, and the boy leaves with his pockets full of money which he did not earn. Every bit of it came from his father.

This younger son heads out for the far country, looking for what the world calls “a good time.” He spent his money freely and irresponsibly. Unsurprisingly, he accumulated some fair-weather friends. So, for a while anyway, he lived it up. But there came a day when he reached in his pocket and there wasn’t anything left. Not only was he broke, but he found that the country where the grass was allegedly greener, wasn’t doing well. A severe famine had descended on it and he didn’t have the means to ride it out. He was broke and without prospects. Going home wasn’t really a good option, since by demanding his inheritance he had basically told his father that he might as well be dead. What about his friends? They were nowhere to be seen. These sorts of “friends” tend to scatter when the money dries up.

Therefore, the younger son “began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.” And as he worked feeding the pigs “he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.” And when Jesus says this, every Israelite, both the Pharisees and tax collectors, had to wince—because a Hebrew couldn’t go any lower than that. This kid had definitely hit rock bottom. Good Jews weren’t supposed to have anything to do with pigs. But then to sink to the point where he would live with them and even envy them—this was horrifying!

After the boy endures this misery for a while, we arrive at the turning point of this parable. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’” So, with his speech planned, he headed back home.

By the world’s reckoning, his father should not receive him. His son had told him in effect “I wish you were dead.” Why would his father allow him back into his home? Or if he did, could things really be as they were before? He could hold his son’s folly over his head the rest of his life. The boy heads home anyway, expecting the worst.

But remember, God doesn’t play by our rules. In verse 20 we see a beautiful picture of God. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” God is compared to a man who cares so little for his dignity that he *runs* to his son. This is not something a man of his position would *ever* do. But he doesn’t care. He seems completely unself-conscious about the public spectacle he is making. This vividly portrays the love that God has for each and every one of us. When the prodigal son came back home, the father said, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and

celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:22-24)

What does the father in the parable mean when he says, “this son of mine was dead...”? Well, sins like selfishness and greed distort our view of the world and we see ourselves and others in a warped way. Things that should be small become big and things that are big become small. And this results in disordered priorities. Our self-centered desires become our master, leading us to become “bent back upon ourselves”, as St. Augustine put it. We withdraw from the true source of Life, and so begin to shrivel. In a word, we become dead in our sins. Spiritually speaking, those without Christ are the walking dead. This sounds rather extreme, but it is true. Look at what Paul says to the Christians in Ephesians, Chapter 2: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...”

But God in his great mercy has made a way for us to return to him in love and forgiveness. Through Christ we can be cleansed and join God’s family. He welcomes all who repent of their sins and want to come back home. And so, necessarily, does the Church. We are the Body of Christ on this earth, and so are his ambassadors to the world. And our orders are to play by God’s rules, not the world’s. The Church should be the place where people aren’t judged or written-off for their moral failures. We should be the place that celebrates the return of the wayward. We should be a place that welcomes the sinner, just as we are welcomed. God does not hold our sins against us, but when we afar off, runs to greet us. His Church should do likewise. We should lift up the fallen and help restore the penitent.

Unfortunately, there are those in the Church who cannot let go of the desire to judge and condemn. They, along with the Pharisees and teachers of the law are represented by the older son in this parable, who “became angry and refused to go in” to the party. They don’t like the fact that God doesn’t play by their rules. They don’t like the fact that God rejoices and welcomes ‘sinners.’ The parable leaves the older brother fuming outside the party. What will he do? Well, the rest of the Luke’s Gospel provides us with the ending of the parable. Far from rejoicing at the return of Israel’s “lost sheep” gathered around Jesus, the Pharisees and teachers of the law conspire to have him killed. Today, their judgmental heirs continue to damage His Body, the Church, in a multitude of ways.

So where are we in these parables? Are we seeking the lost and celebrating when they come home? Or are we hoping people who are already “right thinking” will just trickle in? Well, what have we already been called to do? Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). So we are to bring Christ to the lost, make disciples, join them sacramentally with the Church, and build them up in the Faith. That’s the Great Commission.

This task is truly daunting, and impossible without the grace of God through the power of the Spirit. To get a fair hearing of the Gospel is difficult in these divisive times. Standing up for the fullness of the Faith has never been easy; but our culture’s moral

cynicism and distrust of any authority presents special difficulties. In our current fraught situation, no one's claims concerning truth, goodness, or beauty are considered to be in good faith anymore. Moral cynicism has become mainstream. This is new. For most of human history, this cynicism was the preserve of a miniscule intelligentsia and the criminal class. The masses in general believed in an objective, normative order independent of human opinion. This is no longer the case—in the West, at least. Though people cannot function well as nihilists, still this view is assumed by the educated and pervades powerful culture-shaping forces like literature, music and film. In this world of pervasive skepticism, the Church is often seen as just another peddler of propaganda in the service of the power-hungry.

In spite of this, the Church must not be afraid to proclaim the Christian message confidently. But at the same time, this message cannot be exclusively intellectual, untethered to a faithful community. It must be embodied in the Church, even if imperfectly. There is simply no Christianity apart from the body of Christ. Even given modern cynicism about truth and skepticism about meaning, people still crave community and human interaction. They desire a place of safety where they are cared for. All around us everything can appear to be crumbling, with no solid ground on which to stand. People want something that is real, something genuine and good, something worthy of praise in which they can participate. What they really want is God, even if they won't admit it. When the Church is being the Church, they will find Him there. As James K.A. Smith puts it:

The church is the site where God renews and transforms us—a place where the practices of being the Body of Christ form us into the image of the Son....The fruit of the Spirit emerges in our lives from the seeds planted by the practices of being the Church; and when the Church begins to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, it becomes a witness to a postmodern world. (p.30, Who's Afraid of Postmodernism)

We live in a nation of prodigal sons looking for something better than our decadent culture can offer. They are lost and grabbing onto anything that offers some hope. If they look at us, will they see the Father running to embrace his wayward child, or the older son standing in judgment? Our country already has plenty of older sons. Why don't we aim at being those who hold the ancient faith, while at the same time visibly demonstrating Christ to the world? The pagans who observed the early Church were not drawn by its power and influence, social prestige, prominent membership, or impressive buildings. No, they looked upon these Christians and exclaimed "How they love one another!"

In the Name...