

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 **Different Directions Home**

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

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Narrator: Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So Jesus told them this parable: ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father,

Younger Son: “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.”

Narrator: So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said,

Younger Son: “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

Narrator: So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him,

Younger Son: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

Narrator: But the father said to his slaves,

Father: “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Narrator: And they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became

angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father,

Older Son: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

Narrator: Then the father said to him,

Father: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.””

How we hear this story depends upon where we're sitting. You may see yourself in the chair of the younger son. You may know what it's like to have that restlessness inside you that just wouldn't let you settle down. That wildness that always put you at odds with your family, that kept you from living up to their expectations, that pushed you to take bigger and bigger risks. You may know what it is to have your parents yelling at you, pleading with you, crying over you, while you acted like you didn't care. Maybe you secretly felt as scared by your own impulses as they did.

If you are hearing this story from the vantage point of that first chair, you may understand what caused the younger son to break every convention by demanding his inheritance early and then squandering it going after things that he thought would pay off, thought would be fun, and then turned out to be a bust. And you

may know what it feels like to then be abandoned by the people you thought were your friends; and what it is to hit rock bottom.

If you're listening from that spot, then, for you, this story is all about grace. That moment when you thought you'd burned every bridge, only to see the father racing across the chasm you dug with arms open wide, flinging them around you, kissing you, and welcoming you home. That's nothing but grace.

On the other hand, if you're sitting in the third chair, the chair of the older brother, you may be hearing the story quite differently. If you're in that chair, you know what it is to toe the line, to do everything right, while your problem sibling sucks up every bit of oxygen in the room. You know what it is to make good grades, do your chores, make wise decisions, and see your parents pour all their time and energy and heartbreak into your trouble-making brother as though you were chopped liver. You know what it is to feel like you aren't allowed to make even one mistake, because that role is completely taken. You know what it is to worry about him, yourself. What it is to grieve over the brother you might have had—or even once did have, only to see him devolve into this. And you know what it is to get tired of being sad and scared, and just get mad—to write him off as a waste of time. And you know what it is to feel that somehow, in spite of all your efforts, you have never been loved as much as the brother who got away.

If that's the chair you're sitting in, you may hear this as a story of judgment, because even here, at the end of this parable, there seems to be more expected of you than of your prodigal brother. All he had to do was just show up, and he gets showered with everything; yet somehow, it's you, not him, who's being told to make an attitude adjustment. Where's the grace in that?

Or maybe, just maybe, you are listening to this parable from that center chair—the father's seat. If so, then you know what it is to watch, in terror, while someone you love destroys themselves. You know what it is to yell and beg and cry and try to bring them around, to no purpose. You know what it is to look down that long road every day, hoping, and see nobody on it. Maybe you even know what it is to be caught in the middle, like the father in the parable, trying to make peace between the one person who lives in rebellion and the other person who lives in resentment. If that's the case, then this story is a mixed one for you—because in the midst of the amazing and unimaginable joy of having the lost son come home, you *still* can't celebrate. Now, you're stuck outside with the older son—absorbing all of his hurt and anger. Now, *he* is the one you're pleading with, and he's the one whom

you don't know whether he'll ever come around. If you're in that chair, you may be wondering if there will ever be any rest for you.

That's where Jesus is, as he tells this parable. He's speaking directly to the Pharisees—the good children, the righteous ones. He's been pouring himself out for the Prodigals—sinners and outcasts who've left the fold or been pushed out by their behavior or their circumstances. He has sought them out where they are, eating and drinking with them, helping them to know that the door to God's heart is still open for them. He's been trying to welcome them back to the fold, only to turn around and see the Pharisees who, in their minds, have never left that fold, standing guard in front of the gate. He tries to point out to them that, if they're out there standing guard, then they aren't inside, either. They, too, are missing out on the joy of standing in God's presence.

This is a more complicated parable than we sometimes make it. Or maybe it's more simple than we sometimes make it. At its heart, it's a story about coming home, and a description of what “home” is.

“Home” isn’t about place or proximity. The older son has technically been home the whole time, but he’s never felt at home—never felt sure of his own belovedness.

And the father has been home the whole time, but it’s never been fully a home—because the child he needed for it to be complete was missing.

And the younger son has never felt at home—not with his family, not in the distant land to which he ran-- because wherever he went, he couldn’t find himself.

Until, finally, he did.

That’s a key phrase in the story: “He came to himself.” We think the younger brother got the easy grace, but he, too, had to do something in order to receive it. He had to come to himself. His actions, before, were the actions of someone who was not at peace, who had no true center. But out in that distant land, starving among the pigs, he finally came to himself. He saw, for the first time, what he had done to himself and others. And he finally recognized the goodness of his father.

That goodness, along with his own desperation, was enough to give him courage to return and ask for work.

So, for each of us, there is a different direction home. If you are in the first chair, restless and wandering, the way home is to come to yourself.

If you are in the third chair, stuck in place and resentful, the way home is to trust your own belovedness, and to trust the expansiveness of God's love—God's love, that never gets used up by one person, and which keeps reaching out to include *all* people.

And if you are in that center chair, caught in the middle, the way home is to let go of thinking that you can change either person in the other chairs. You don't have to give up on them, just give them over. For you, the grace in this story is that God is doing the job you've been trying to do, by yourself.

Because the truth is, in Jesus, God has sat in every one of those chairs, but redemptively. Like the younger son, Jesus traveled to the margins; only he did it without losing touch with who he was.

Like the older son, Jesus stayed close to God, only he did so without losing touch with God's will and God's love.

And, like the father in the center, Jesus chose to reach out to both—younger brother and older brother, prodigal and Pharisee: to plead with both, and to remain outside with them until everyone found their way through the door into the joy of God's presence.

And that is what home truly is, wherever you may find it. Home is living in the joy of God's presence, at peace with *all* of our brothers and sisters—no one lost, no one left out. And the grace of this story is that, no matter what chair we're sitting in, the door into that presence is always open—and *God's* joy won't be complete until every one of us steps inside.