

**SECOND READING: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

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1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." 20 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. 21 Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." 22 But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, "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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" 31 Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and **all that is mine is yours.** 32 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."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**FIRST READING: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

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16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is the word of the Lord... **THANKS BE TO GOD**

## “Welcome Home”

Ah, the story of the Prodigal Son...it’s one of the greatest of all stories, maybe not just of scripture, but of all literature, some would say.<sup>1</sup> And why? Maybe it is, as Carla Pratt Keyes surmises, because the story taps into the universal human yearning for home...home, not just as a place, but also a condition of being where we have a sense of wholeness, contentedness, belonging, where we are at peace, and loved. Yes, to feel at home is one of the great needs of human existence. *Repeat.* Poet and philosopher, David Whyte, agrees, but he too points out that *we, humans, are the only ones of creation, as opposed to the crow, the stone, the mountain, the cloud, the sky, that knows what it’s like to also live in exile. The ability to turn our face towards home is then, he says, one of the great human endeavors.*<sup>2</sup> Friends, the parable of the Prodigal told by Jesus, recorded in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, is just such an endeavor.

It is such an endeavor because both sons, the younger who is physically far away and the older who has never physically left the house and fields, both feel the pain, the woundedness, the loneliness of living in exile. The younger son eventually turns his face and returns home while the older is still laboring in vain when the story ends, “*laboring after something he hasn’t yet been able to name*”.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that what both sons need is to receive what has been being openly offered them all along, that is, the love, the abundant love and forgiveness of the father. “*All that is mine is yours,*” the father says. Receiving love and forgiveness is how we all become whole and at peace, how we all truly arrive at home when we’re in exile. We, humans, yearn to turn our faces toward home when we’re away.

*We yearn to be loved. We yearn to be forgiven. In one of his short stories, “The Capital of the World”, Ernest Hemingway wrote of a Spanish father who wanted to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. In order to locate the boy, he took out an ad in the newspaper which read, “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montaña at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Love,*

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<sup>1</sup> Carla Pratt Keyes. “Turning Towards Home” <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/c18-the-fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-c-2019/> (accessed 3-18-19).

<sup>2</sup> David Whyte. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/29/david-whyte-belonging/>

<sup>3</sup> Carla Pratt Keyes.

*Papa. Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father went to the hotel's square, he found 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.<sup>4</sup>*

We yearn to be forgiven. And our God yearns for us to know his forgiveness. And it's a freely-given, unqualified, unconditional forgiveness at that. No strings attached which can be pulled to snatch the offer back. In the parable, the younger son doesn't even get a chance to apologize, to say his rehearsed speech: *"I am no longer worthy to be your son; just treat me like a hired hand,"* ...he doesn't get to say this before the father throws his big bear hug around him. I don't know if you noticed that or not. The forgiveness of God which reaches out to the Lost is SO free and unconditional that it precedes repentance, it inspires repentance even. Grace is still hard for us to get our minds wrapped around...no need for an adequate amount of remorse or penance or time on our knees. Repentance is not IN ORDER to receive forgiveness by our God, it is BECAUSE of the forgiving grace of our God. It's free.

*This reminds me of a story of a mother and her teenage daughter. Their relationship became increasingly broken as the girl grew and became more rebellious. It culminated late one night when the police arrested her for drunk driving. The mother went to the station to pick her up. The two didn't speak until the next afternoon. The mother broke the tension by giving her daughter a small gift-wrapped box. Her daughter nonchalantly opened it and found a little rock inside. She rolled her eyes and said, "Cute, Mom, what's this for?" "Read the card," the mother instructed. Her daughter took the card out of the envelope and read it. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. She got up and lovingly hugged her mom as the card fell to the floor. On the card were these words: "This rock is more than 200,000,000 years old. That is how long it will take before I give up on you."<sup>5</sup> Friends, our repentance comes out of the very depths of our souls BECAUSE we know that forgiveness of God has already been given at Calvary (point to cross). We love because God first loved us. It's amazing, amazing grace.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest Hemingway in *"The Capital of the World"*. Quoted in [stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2012/08/no-strings-attached.html](http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2012/08/no-strings-attached.html). (accessed 3-18-19).

<sup>5</sup> Story from *"The Rock"* quoted from [stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2012/08/no-strings-attached.html](http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2012/08/no-strings-attached.html). (accessed 3-18-19).

Yes, God yearns for us to know his forgiveness. And our God yearns to welcome any and all. God is always watching, and at the first opportunity running to welcome the lost home again, or is leaving the party to find and recover those of us who are in self-imposed exile. There is no one, absolutely NO ONE that God does not welcome home. The scripture tells us that Jesus told this parable one afternoon before his disciples and Pharisees, but also before a crowd of sinners, tax collectors and other outcasts. He told it while being criticized by the Pharisees for associating with these “kind” of people. And even as he told this story, he knew that he would soon be giving his life on the cross for all of humanity, all who share HIS flesh. He, the fully human/fully divine one, would soon be gathering victims and victimizers, sinners and the sinned against, unto himself...people like those in the crowd that day and like those criticizing him for even speaking to those in the crowd that day. It was he who would, in solidarity, carry ALL, everyone, with him, leaving no one, no matter who they were, outside of his saving reach. As W. Borchert says, *“There is no ‘outside the gate’ with God, if God is the one who died outside the gate for those who are outside.”*<sup>6</sup>

God yearns for us to know his forgiveness, to welcome any and all, and our God yearns to find us, wherever that is. It’s a profound truth that we all need hear, if we hear nothing else today. There is NO PLACE, NO PLACE, NO PLACE, that we can be that God does not go, that God has not already gone to welcome us home. The younger son, after prodigiously wasting all his inheritance, and after being caught up in a famine was physically far from home when he “came to himself”. He came to himself when the slop he was feeding the hogs began to look good. Now exhausted, he considers his speech as he walks the road home. The older son is lost too, but in his heart. He begrudges that his brother is being so lovingly received by their father, that he who was so irresponsible is now being pampered. Likely he resents not only that he’s all along felt it was a duty to stay home, but that his back-breaking work does not seem to be earning him a better place in his father’s house. The music and laughter of the welcome home party are just too much for him. Both sons are lost, but in different places. But

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<sup>6</sup>W. Borchert. Quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 249.

God does not give up, never turns away, never stops pursuing, ever. What are the words of the psalmist?...*“Where can I go from your spirit? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your left hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”* (Ps 139) There is no place so dark, no place so far, no thing we can do that is so bad that takes us out of God’s reach. God in Christ has already gone all the way into hell for us, to show us this very thing.

*Theologian professor, Cyndy Rigby, tells a story about her husband, Bill, giving her brother a framed photograph for Christmas. It was a picture that Bill took of her brother’s 7-year-old son, Oscar, running down the sidewalk toward him. “Oscar,” she describes, “is running down the sidewalk with an expression of the purest joy on his face.” And in the foreground of the picture, you see only her brother’s hand, extended and open. He is facing Oscar, waiting to receive him. “It’s a great picture,” Cindy says, “and this is image of the God of our imagination, the God who waits patiently for us to run to him, ever ready to receive, ever ready to bless.” “But this God is too foggy, too distant, too predictable, too respectable,” she says. “Instead, actually, our God, who we know in Jesus Christ cannot wait to receive us, and so comes running toward us. Our God is the one who is always and forever running down the sidewalk.... even now, a look of joy and expectation on his face, eager to be embraced, even when we pull our hands back, even when we refuse to go in to the party, even when we deny and... crucify.”<sup>7</sup>*

Friends, we, humans, are indeed the one part of creation that knows what it’s like to live in exile—to live with woundedness and a sense of being lost. But we are able (because God makes us able) to acknowledge the exile, and to turn our faces and come home. This universal yearning for home is surely one of the reasons this is one of the greatest stories of all time, but another reason is because we all can identify with the sons, either or maybe both.

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<sup>7</sup>Cindy Rigby. “Prodigal Cross”. Presbyterian Outlook, 2014: April 14.

If you feel today that you are most like the younger son, well then, you likely have already on your way home. All I can say is “*Keep going. Run.*” If you are most like the elder brother...well, maybe the fact that Jesus leaves the story unfinished should tell you that you need finish it in your own life now. You need allow yourself to be sought by the One whose love is unconditional, who loves you for just who you are, whose forgiveness has already been given, and who is even now running down the path to receive you and escort you into the banquet hall to take your seat at the table. God’s child, home and safe...forever.<sup>8</sup> Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> John Buchanan. “*What We Believe About Jesus 3. His Message*” [www.fourthchurch.rog/sermons/2004/032104/html](http://www.fourthchurch.rog/sermons/2004/032104/html). (accessed 3/29/2019)