

Coming Home

17th Sunday after Pentecost – September 26, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’ ”

Today, we continue a four-week series on the reality of loneliness and the comfort of coming home to God -- our own return from exile.

Released from jail?

Today’s scripture passage is one of Jesus’ most well-known parables.¹ It is a story built around an extravagant welcome home for a wild son who has done nothing more than to repent and return home. You and I hear in this parable a story about a father and his sons, but Jesus’ listeners would have heard much more – they would have heard a story of exile’s end.

Over the last two weeks, we have looked at the story of the

What’s a Parable?

Jesus often taught using parables. Indeed, more than two dozen parables are recorded for us in the NT Gospels! A parable is a very short story with a double meaning; it is brief and metaphorical. On the surface, the parable might be about sowing or fishing, but on a deeper level, it points to something else and it challenges the hearer to discover that second meaning by thoughtful listening. C. H. Dodd gives us a classic definition that repays a close reading: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” In other words, we need to let Jesus’ parables surprise us and make us think!

One caution . . . the nature of the parables makes it easy for us to let our imaginations run wild. Over the centuries, Christians have done exactly that. My advice is that you let the stories be stories, don’t push them too far, and try to hear the surprise! Let the stories subvert your normal way of thinking!

¹The February 23, 2003, background study was devoted to this parable. That study focused on some of the shocking individual elements of the parable. Today’s study is focused more on seeing Israel’s story in this parable. The 2003 study can be downloaded at www.standrewccl.org.

Babylonian exile and its aftermath. To recap, nearly six hundred years before Jesus, the Babylonians overran Jerusalem, burned it, and sent thousands of Jews into exile in Babylon. To the Jews, it was like they had been tossed in prison. Believing that they were being punished for their sins, the Jews felt abandoned by God and stripped of everything they cherished. Yet, in the midst of this exile, prophets brought words of hope and encouragement, a promise that one day the people's sins would be forgiven and the exile would end. After all, forgiveness of sins and release of the captives goes hand in hand. No jailer throws open the prison doors unless the punishment has been served. As N.T. Wright wrote, "Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying 'return from exile.'"²

Fifty years after the exile began, the Jews were allowed to begin returning home. They would have asked themselves, "Has God forgiven our sins? Have the jail doors been thrown open?" In a word, no. They were not free and as the decades turned into centuries, it became clear to the Jews that the exile had not ended, that they still awaited the day when God would truly welcome them home, when their sins would be forgiven. In that context, we turn to Jesus' parable, trying to hear it as a Galilean Jew would have heard it 2,000 years ago.

Coming home

Today's parable is well-known and much loved, as it should be. This is a story worth celebrating. A young man has abandoned his father, taking his inheritance early, only to spend it all on a life of partying. After reaching rock-bottom, he finally decides to return home. But he does so in sincere

Jesus Tells Three Parables about Coming Home

Any biblical passage is easier to understand if we put it in context. This is true even of the parables. Though each parable is its own self-contained story, you'll find it helpful to look at the paragraphs immediately preceding and following a parable. Today's parable is a good example.

In the opening verses of chapter 15, Luke tells us that assorted tax collectors and sinners are gathered around Jesus. Nearby Pharisees are offended that Jesus would welcome all the wrong sorts of people into his company. After all, the Pharisees wouldn't be seen in such company, much less eat with them. Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd's joy in finding one lost sheep from a flock of one hundred (15:3-7). The second parable is about the joy of a woman who lost a single coin and then found it, after working long and hard to find it (v. 8-10). Finally, Jesus turns to today's parable and a father's joy in finding a long-lost son.

As we saw a few weeks ago when we considered Jesus' parable about the lost sheep (Aug 15, 2004: it can be found at www.standrewcl.org), these are all stories of coming home, of the huge, joy-filled welcome extended to all those who turn toward God.

repentance, planning to ask nothing of his father other than a job. When the son arrives home, the father, abandoning any semblance of decorum, runs out to greet the "prodigal" son. So excited is the father at the son's return, he throws a huge party.³

Imagine for a moment that you are in the crowd, hearing Jesus tell this story. You've grown up amidst the remembered pain of exile in Babylon, reading the Scripture called Lamentations. You've cherished the promises in the scroll of Isaiah. And you've resented the iron hand of the pagan Romans. How do you think this story would sound to you? In addition to all else we might find here, of course this is a story of return from exile, of the prison doors being thrown wide open, of the forgiveness of sins. The father is not a jailer or even a judge here; instead, he lovingly waits outside the prison walls for his beloved to emerge. This is the Good News for the oppressed and broken-hearted that "proclaims liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18).

Next week, we'll need to keep in mind Jesus' parable about coming home when we read Paul's promise that nothing can separate us from God's love. No matter how lonely we may be, no matter what loss we might have suffered, no matter what sin we might have committed, God waits with open arms, anxious to embrace us in a celebration of boundless joy. Though we may feel lonely at times in our lives, the truth is that we are never alone.

² From Wright's, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, 1996. p. 268.

³A discussion of the older son's resentment will have to wait for another day. But ask yourself, who among Jesus' listeners might have thought that Jesus was speaking of them as he described the older son.

Daily Bible Readings

(more about coming home and the forgiveness of sins – all this is context for Jesus' parable)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Ezekiel 36:8-15 God brings a message of homecoming (see v. 8)</p>	<p>Day 2 Zephaniah 3:14-20 A song about Israel's coming home (see v. 20)</p>
<p>Day 3 Isaiah 43:25 – 44:3 Israel's welcome home (return from exile) will mean that Israel's sins have been forgiven.</p>	<p>Day 4 Ezekiel 37:21-28 God will gather his people together, saving them and cleansing. Do you see here a picture of God's kingdom?</p>
<p>Day 5 Micah 7:18-20 Micah brings a promise from God of a restoration that would be fulfilled in Jesus.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at www.standrewumc.org.

**If you aren't able to visit a class during today's Open House,
please visit one next week!**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The focus in this series has been upon our own loneliness and the home we have with God and with the church, the body of Christ.. Perhaps we should reflect upon our own response to those who are lonely, lost, and alone. How often do we reach out to "loners" or to those who seem not to be connected with others? As disciples of Jesus Christ, what do you think ought to be our response to those who seem to be on the outside of the circle? What are some specific ways we could reach out to the lonely? For example, we might devote a portion of our time to visiting the elderly – just visiting. What a simple, yet profoundly kind, ministry. What often makes us reluctant to reach out to those we might perceive as lonely?
2. In this parable, the errant son is welcomed back with a party, with singing and dancing! The whole neighborhood is invited to the celebration. Is this how we welcome back those in our own lives who have hurt us or offended us? If we welcome them at all, do we expect that they will spend some time in penance, showing us the contrition we think we are owed? Notice in the parable that the father wasn't even listening as the son apologized!