

The Lost Son

Luke 15: 11-24

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Today we have one of the most famous teachings of Jesus, commonly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This story is the third in a series Jesus told about the ways God looks for us when we are lost and far from home. Jesus began, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.”

The younger son left home. In itself, that could have been just a normal part of growing up. After all, we cannot be children forever – at some point, we have to make our own way. But this man left by burning his bridges. According to the custom of the day, asking for his inheritance while his father still lived was like saying, “Father, I wish you were already dead.” The son repudiated his heritage. He disgraced his family. He left all that he had been taught was good and right.

Now, the turning point in the story occurs after his money had run out and an economic depression hit the country. The young man took a job feeding pigs, animals repulsive to a Jewish man because they were “unclean.” Yet, he grew so hungry that even the foul pig pods looked appetizing. His need became desperate. Finally, as Jesus told the story, the son “came to himself.” Jesus’ wonderfully succinct phrase implies that somehow the man had gone away from himself. He had started on a course of life and could not stop until he ran out of resources. When everything was gone, he “came to.” He bottomed out and woke up. He returned to who he really was.

Waking Up Hungry

Sometimes, without even knowing it, we get ourselves on a road away from God and, therefore, away from our true selves. We may not even know how far away we are until “the money runs out.” We have run through whatever we have been living on, and now our hearts growl with hunger. These pangs we experience vary in intensity:

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We may feel vaguely that life is just not what we thought it would be. We always had planned for something different. There's nothing particularly wrong. It's just that we thought we were supposed to feel more alive, experience more joy, be more enthused about living. We may have seen in our parents or grandparents a sense of tranquility about their place in the world. But that hasn't happened to us. We don't yet feel right in our own skin.

Or we may "come to" with a sickening sense of emptiness. The years have blown by. We hardly paid attention. Looking back, nothing stands out as significant. So little accomplished at work. So little love given to the world, to friends or even to family.

Worse still, we may wake up one day to an awful self-loathing. Life seems to have had no higher purpose than our immediate wants and comforts. We used people for our wants. Some we ran over, others we deceived, many more we ignored. There are no good grounds to justify our existence. And, increasingly, there is evidence that we have done more harm than good with the years given to us.

All the consuming we have done has not filled us. We stuff the need according to our tastes and economic ability: extreme sports or fine restaurants, remodeled kitchens or rebuilt engines, new titles at work to make us more powerful or new clothes to make us more attractive, a more daring deal or the perfect vacation. But when the "new" wears off, when what has occupied our attention runs out, the hunger roars back upon us. No matter what we do or get, we realize when we wake up to the condition of our lives that we are far from home.

The father is the source of blessing; his house is the place where life is in balance.

At first, we may not be able to describe this *home*; we simply know we are not there. We may not know in those waking moments what being ourselves is supposed to be, but we feel sure that we have not been living in harmony with our innermost design. We may not have a description for what connecting with God could be like; we realize, however, that we are a long way from any such connection. Our need yanks us awake, and we begin to search for a way to get back.

In Jesus' story, the father who let the son go clearly represents God. This was consistent with the way Jesus taught his followers to call God "Our Father." Such intimacy was unprecedented. Jesus showed us the reality that God is the great Father for whom we have been longing. He is our source and protector, our guide

and our goal. God, then, is intimately connected with all that makes up home. The father in the story is the source of blessing; his house is the place where life is in balance. His presence is healing and safety. On his land is to be found the work that satisfies and generates an abundant harvest. In his sight is the affirmation we crave. If we would be at peace and at home with ourselves, we will have to be at home with God our Father – for the Father *is* home. But before we consider how we can return to God, we need to consider how we got so far from God in the first place.

The Impulse to Leave

Why did the younger son head off for the far country? Obviously, he didn't set out with the ultimate goal of becoming a professional pig feeder. He must have thought that what he wanted, what would truly satisfy him, lay in a place far from the home he always had known.

So, why have *we* sought our happiness apart from God? Why do we take off on paths that lead directly away from the Father of blessing? There seem to be many possibilities:

- Some people never knew any better. Growing up, they hardly heard of God. What they did hear was confusing or even repellent. They have spent years groping blindly after what makes for life and peace.

- Some were wounded by a parent or family member at an early age. God, especially the Father, seems untrustworthy in view of such damage. They feel on their own in this world.

- Some say they left because they wanted to try their hand at the world's game. Our culture prizes the achievements of position and wealth. Such rewards entice us to try and master the game, even at the risk of our souls. So often the world looks much more interesting than God (especially as God gets represented by people in churches).

- Some went in quest of the mysterious, to seek the rush of spiritual experience or passion in the arts. Those of a religious temperament may have left all they knew of God in search of God. They wanted a God who seemed more full-blooded than the thin religiosity taught them in their youth.

- Others went off to fill up a sense of unworthiness. They left home to try to fill the expectations others had for them. One may have leaped into a marriage without reflection, and then tried awfully hard to portray a particular appearance. Another may have pursued someone else's measure of a successful life.

■ Still others may have given up trying to relate to God because of suffering a loss so searing that bitterness continues to block any possibility of faith.

■ Many of those raised in churches have left God because of how his people act. An experience of rejection or betrayal in the church led some to pack their bags and leave behind anything religious. A legalistic atmosphere can threaten to suck the life out of us. Some could not reason their way out of that trap, so they simply left faith behind.

We have all believed a very ancient lie: that God does not have our best interests at heart.

There are thousands of reasons that send us away from home in God our Father. They involve seeking the goodness of God in sources other than God. Many lose their way for quite heartbreaking and even understandable reasons. But whether our flight to the far country seems warranted is not the real issue. The root cause is deeper than any presenting explanation. We all have believed a very ancient lie: that God does not have our best interests at heart. We can do better for ourselves when we live on our own rather than live in harmony with God. I want to be the master of my own life and I do not want any God imposing his will upon me. The truth is, I am as willing as the prodigal son to squander my Father's heritage to do what I want. Because I believe the delusion that what I want will be more fulfilling than what God wants for me. I do not trust that God will take care of me. I do not believe that the Father is good.

To Know that Someone Waits

When the son had come to himself, his pride was broken and he determined to go back to his father and ask for a job as a servant. The young man felt shame, but his need was stronger than his guilt. He prepared a speech of confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." So, taking these words of confession, the younger son got up and headed for home.

Someone is waiting for me to come home!

Jesus continued: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The son began his admission, but the father did not let him finish. He called for the finest robe and a ring representing family place and authority to be brought, along with shoes for his bruised and barefoot boy. The father ordered a great feast. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Suddenly, we learn that the father all along had been watching the road. The son had shamed him. By custom, the father could have repudiated the very existence of such a wanton child. Wasting time looking for his return made the father a subject of derision. But the father was crazy about his son; he loved him enough to cast his sight down the foreign road every day his child was away. When his son returned, he showered the shame with a welcome.

What would it mean to learn that someone is watching with straining eyes down the road to catch a glimpse of you? When we are far from home, what would happen if we realized that someone was waiting eagerly for the first signs of our return from a foreign land, waiting to celebrate our first steps home with open arms and a banquet of celebration?

In the epilogue of Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, we read of the beginning of renewal for the story's main character, Raskolnikov. Toward the beginning of the story, Raskolnikov had murdered an old woman pawnbroker, feeling no remorse and justifying his act as ridding society of an undesirable. Throughout the epic, he was wholly absorbed in himself – a narcissist fit for the 21st century.

Though Raskolnikov certainly is an unattractive character, one woman still loved him. Sonia even followed Raskolnikov all the way to the Siberian work camp, where he was sentenced to seven years of hard labor for his crime. She came to the fence every day to speak with him during brief breaks in the work.

For a long time, Raskolnikov spurned her presence. It meant nothing to him. He would remain quiet when he was with her, as if annoyed. Then, Raskolnikov fell ill and was placed in the hospital ward for many weeks.

Sonia tried to see him, but only rarely could gain admittance. Still, she came every day, "sometimes only to stand a minute and look up at the windows of the ward."

Raskolnikov's condition improved slowly. One evening he felt strong enough to rise from his bed and go to the window. He looked out and saw Sonia standing at the hospital gate; she appeared to be waiting for something. "Something stabbed him to the heart at that minute." He realized that every day he had been ill, unable to rise, believing himself alone in his misery, Sonia had come to the gate to wait awhile for him.

Raskolnikov looked for Sonia eagerly the next day. But she did not come, nor the next day. And, then, Raskolnikov understood that he was waiting for Sonia. Before, she had been the one waiting; now, he was the one. Before it had made no difference to him, but now he was expecting her. Before, he loathed her; now, he discovered that as he waited for her, he loved her.

When they met again at last, Raskolnikov found that “all at once something seemed to seize him and fling him at her feet. He wept and threw his arms around her knees.” Sonia had out-waited his self-absorption until love broke through him at last. The one so far from home, in a Siberian prison and detached from his own soul, finally understood that someone had waited for him every day. He reconnected to life and came home to himself.¹

There is one who waits for us. He stands every day in the yard looking up at the ward where we lie on a bed, mired in thoughts of our condition. He comes every day and stands in the cold winter light, and he waits while we think life is only this sick bed and the wants of our illness. He waits in the yard for the evening when we get up and look out the window to see him there – and our hearts are stabbed. Someone is waiting for us to come home! Our shame will not be answered with recrimination, but with tender forgiveness. He has not waited begrudgingly; he is not angry. This loving one has let go all the time that has gone by. He just wants us in his arms.

The father strained his eyes down the foreign road for any sign of his son. If we were to step into this story that Jesus told and began to consider that the Father was waiting for us now, would that be enough to get us to our feet? We may be able to slop the pigs in a foreign land for a long time if we do not believe there is any other choice, if shame prevents thoughts of home. But what yearning homeward is awakened when we discover that God our Father waits for us?

God, our loving heavenly Father, watches every moment for any sign of our return. He is ready to embrace us even in our filth. He wants to love us through the shame and call us his own dear children! He waits longingly for us to realize he is there. So is it time to get up and start down the road toward home in God?²

¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor; *Crime and Punishment* (New York, P.F. Collier & Son; 1917) Epilogue. With thanks for these insights to Vanstone, W.H.; *The Stature of Waiting* (London; Darton, Longman and Todd; 1982) pp. 96-8.

² This sermon excerpted from my book, *Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God*, Reformation Press, 2007.