

Welcome Home!  
Luke 15:11-32  
Dr. Patricia L. Hunter  
Seattle First Baptist Church  
March 31, 2019

The scripture has been beautifully presented in song this morning. Thank you Ben, choir, and Atit. This scripture, Luke 15 11-23 is the third in a series of stories where Jesus shares that those who are estranged from God can come home to God. And, when we make our way back to the Divine there will be great rejoicing among the heavenly host. The first passage about a lost item is about a shepherd that has 100 sheep, but one is missing. Jesus said a **good** shepherd will leave the 99 and go look for the one that is lost and then rejoice with all his neighbors over the one that was found. Next, Jesus mentions a woman who had 10 silver coins and one comes up missing. Jesus said the woman will turn the house upside down until she finds the one that was lost. Once that coin is found she will share the good news with the neighbors and all will rejoice. Then we have the text that was sung this morning.

The scripture in Luke's gospel of the father and two sons is frequently referred to as the story of the Prodigal Son. But that title only focuses on one character in the story and really the story is about the love of this amazing forgiving father. We often talk about the amazing love of mothers, but men here is your chance to shine.

Family relationships are complicated. We navigate through sibling rivalries, high parental expectations, childhood traumas, teenage rebellions, marital disappointments, middle-aged crises, family rejections, hormones run-a-

muk, elderly decline, and more. We don't get to choose which family we are born into. We have to do the best we can with what we get. At times, our family of choice becomes more family to us than the family we are born into.

Today's text is a story of a man of wealth who had two sons. We are told upfront this parable is about two sons. The central point of connection is the father. The text does not say this is a story about two brothers. So at first reading, we know there are issues. We have two brothers who did not much care for one another.

The younger son, wasn't feeling it at home—wasn't feeling satisfied, didn't like the rules nor the family expectations. He needed to get away. He wanted to live life on his own terms. Tradition had it that the sons would work with the father and then at the father's death the sons would inherit the land and all the father's property. So, when the younger son asked for his portion of the inheritance before the father's death, he dishonored tradition, dishonored their faith, and dishonored the community. New Testament scholar, R. Alan Culpepper, said this younger son treated his father as if he were already dead.

I can only imagine the pain of a parent who is estranged or has lost his or her child. It is not about the money or things that may have been taken. There is the worry about their physical safety and their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. There is the wondering and not knowing where they are. There is the constant nagging wondering whether they are alive, or dead,

or hurt, or in prison. The child may leave, but the love for the child remains. Somebody here knows what I am talking about.

We know things did not go well for the younger son. The KJV reads that he spent all his money on riotous living. And, being the financial planner that I am, I note that he did not save some of his inheritance in an emergency fund in the event of hard times. So when the famine came all the money and possessions the young man had been given were gone. Funny thing how we can have plenty friends as long as things are going well for us and we have money to spend on them. But as soon as the money gets funny, or we land on hard times, friends can be as hard to find as hens teeth.

Defeated and In desperation, the young man was able to be hired by a pig farmer. At that time a Jewish man working for a Gentile pig farmer was as low as a Jewish man could sink. Time will not permit me to go into all the cultural and religious laws that prohibited Jews from being around pigs you can look that up during your devotional times this week. But know at this point the young man was filled with shame and remorse. Sometimes we have to hit rock bottom, before we can see life differently. Sometimes we have to lose everything before we reach out for help. Sometimes we have to lose everything just to realize we really had the whole world at our fingertips. Sometimes we have to lose everything before we realize others are not the problem, we are to blame for our situation.

Scripture reads that this man came to himself while in the pigpen. When we are hungry, look bad, smell bad, all alone, and feel hopeless—possibilities appear. The young man realized his father might hire him as a hired

servant that way he would at least have food to eat. He certainly couldn't go back expecting rights and privileges of being his father's son. He had torn that relationship to shreds. But maybe he would be hired to work the land. So he rehearsed what he would say to his father. Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. Please forgive me. I am no longer worthy to be considered your son. Please treat me as one of your hired servants.

As the young man got closer to his home, his father could see him in the distance. Filled with emotion, the father ran to his son, hugged and kissed him. And when the son tried to give his speech, father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am... Shut up! Said the father. He told his servants, Get the robe—the best one, give him a bath, get the ring, and put some shoes on him. We going to have a blow out party. Tell the neighbors, we celebrate tonight. We want the Wagyu beef, and the best wine. There will be music, dance, and rejoicing. This son of mine was dead, but is now alive. He was lost, but is now found. Pastor Tim often reminds us that we can go home again.

Well, as we used to say back in the day, ***ain't no party like a holy ghost party cause a holy ghost party don't stop.*** The joint was jumping, the music was loud, and the party was in full swing when the elder son heard all this commotion and wondered what was going on. One of the servants informed him that his baby brother had returned and their father was throwing a block party for him complete with wagyu beef. We would like to think big brother would have gone in to at least get a snack if not welcome

his brother home. But that was not the case. Big brother was immediately enraged, resentful, and he refused to go to the celebration.

But you have to love Pops. When the father realized big brother was not going to join in the celebration, Pops left the party to go after the elder son. And Pops begged him to join the celebration and welcome his brother home. There were rules of hospitality in that time and it was considered rude to leave your guests that you had invited to a party. But this father loved both his sons. Not only did he run after the wayward younger boy to welcome him home, now he had to go get the elder son as well.

You know the rest of the story. The elder brother rudely said to the father, Listen! All my life I have worked like a dog to please you. I have followed all your rules. I never left your side. I never caused you a minute of trouble, and you never threw me and my friends a barbecue with roast goat. Yet this no good son of yours treats you like you were dead, spends all his money on prostitutes, and you give him the best party and kill the fatted calf.

I'm sure the father was taken aback. For the elder son felt he should be able to determine how his father showed his love. The elder wanted to be the gatekeeper of his father's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Sometimes we act in a similar manner. We want others to pay their dues, before they receive a promotion at work. We want other church members to wait their turn before they can be the president of the Women's auxiliary, choir president, or commission chair. We don't want new people coming into our

ministries and making changes. That is not the way we do things around here.

But my sisters and brothers, we are not the gatekeepers of God's blessings. God will bless whom God chooses and God blesses us so we can bless others. We are all recipients of God's forgiveness, grace, and mercy. And, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Heaven rejoices when one of God's children finds her way or his way back home to God. Instead of us being resentful or rude, or suspicious of those who find their way back to God, we can throw them a party and say welcome home.

We do not know whether the elder son ever went to the party. I wonder which son was really lost in this story—the elder who never left and was filled with resentment or the younger who left and returned with humility? Perhaps our question today is, will we join the party and embrace the new things that God is doing in our midst? Will we embrace those new believers—our new neighbors who find community here with us? If heaven rejoices over a lost sheep that is found and a coin that is found, how much more rejoicing will there be when one of God's chosen finds their way back home.

If you are here today and you do not have a faith community, welcome home. You didn't come here by accident today, but by the Spirit's leading. You may have made some big mistakes. Life may not be unfolding as you imagined. But know that you are forgiven and God wants you to come home.

Bring us home on love's renewing tide to the place of our belonging.  
Bring us home to your redeeming side; bring your scattered people home.  
From our closed in fears, from our wasted years, to the place of our  
belonging; To our highest call, sharing love with all, bring your scattered  
people home.

Please stand as you are able and sing one of our heritage hymns, ***Bring  
Us Home.***