

“Home”

(Luke 15)

Maybe it was the mud swishing between his toes or the odor of the pigs or the growling of his stomach that churned as he thought about picking up the brown apple core before a hog wobbled toward it taking it as a prize, or maybe it was the combination of all this that allowed the younger brother to wake up to the metaphorical and literal stench of his life at that particular moment. At that exact moment, miles away, the older brother came in from the fields, mud on his hands, sweat on his brow, only to see his father still sitting at the window with barely audible sighs escaping every few moments as he stared off at the horizon waiting for the setting sun to cast a familiar shadow of the one who had wandered away. One filled with remorse, one filled with resentment, one filled with hope of reconciliation; and we are right there with them in the messy, muddy middle of this emotional family drama, and friends that is the point. The parable of the prodigal son is familiar both because we've heard this passage and preacher's words about it countless times before, but more specifically, we've lived it. Like a thistle that sticks to our sock in the summer scratching our skin and leaving a mark, the parable of the prodigal son pricks at our soul until we pay attention. This is not some quaint, cozy, feel good narrative that brings a smile to our face; this parable starts rummaging around our minds and hearts awaking emotional, family stuff we usually check at the church door.

“There was a man who had two sons”, Jesus starts out. Immediately, the people listening knew this story line. Sibling rivalry is woven throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Cain's jealous rage toward his younger brother Able; Jacob comes out of the womb grasping the heel of his seconds older brother Essau and eventually steals Essau's birthright; Joseph's precocious and proud predictions of the ways his other brothers would bow down to him; “a man had two sons” is code language in scripture for there is about to be trouble, with a capital T. But, we know that. I remember wrestling with my brother; both of us furious that one took something that belonged to the other. I remember stomping on stairs and slamming doors. I remember using my angelic I am completely innocent look when my parents came in to see what was going on, just to get my brother's goat. Sibling rivalry is a reality scripture reflects back at us. “A man had two sons”, and those in Jesus' day and we still today know this parable will cut closer than others. We quickly learn the younger requests his inheritance. We automatically assume it is because he is impatient or impulsive; even though Jesus is silent about his motivation. It might just as well be the older brother is brash or a bully when they go to the fields, until the younger brother wishes to no longer be manipulated. Both scenarios still echo in our families today. Whatever the rationale, we know that on a gut-level the younger brother's request is extreme, and we are right. The word 'property' in Greek, is 'bios', meaning life. The younger son is essentially saying “give me my share of your life, father.” Ouch! “A man had two sons”, we knew it was not going to be good, but that friends is brokenness, painful brokenness. And if that was not offensive enough, the implication is the father is okay with this and gives him more than likely the land the younger son would have inherited, only when father died. Now, it might help to realize that really it was up to the oldest son in a family once a father died to parcel out the land fairly and justly to the other siblings. Perhaps the relationship between older and younger brother was mired with distrust or outright hostility leading the younger to act in such a disrespectful way. Needless to say, like in our own families, relationships are complicated and sometimes riddled with conflict from words misspoken and misunderstandings.

So, rich with cash, the younger son flees; the older stays behind. But the reality is that physical absence does not erase the emotional connection. The younger brother turns to 'riotous living' as the King James Version puts it, which somehow seems more vivid than the word 'dissolute'

we heard today. Things go from bad to worse to rock bottom. There is a famine, it is almost like Jesus is saying, 'Just in case you didn't get it, let me borrow blatantly a part of the Joseph story.' The younger feeds pigs, which I know caused wrinkled noses and judgmental shaking of heads as this parable pulled the crowd in deeper. The younger is a stranger, a foreigner, made a servant/slave, cast aside and forgotten. Do you hear echoes of the book of Exodus here? Friends, Jesus is doing nothing less than connecting the most important narrative of the Jewish people with the younger brother. When the Hebrew people found themselves in the mud of Egypt, enslaved and broken, they cried out to God, they were the younger brother. But centuries after settling in the land, finding a comfortable niche in the Roman Empire where they could both practice their faith and participate in the economic prosperity around them, they had become the older brother. Judging who was acceptable, thinking they were in control, hiding behind arcane laws to justify hurtful behavior. It might just be that as much as we might identify with the younger or older brother, the truth is we are both. It is not either or, it is both and.

The younger son and older son, broken in their relationship to each other and to their father; so the younger comes back with a prepared speech; the father is so quick to race out, embrace and doesn't even really hear with the young son says. Instead, he call for a party, a loud, music pumping, dancing around, kill the fatted calf, which is like serving the very best of the best kind of dish, kind of party. Timothy Keller writes about the father's extravagant actions, "The best robe in the house would have been the father's own robe, the unmistakable sign of restored standing in the family. The father is saying, 'I am not going to wait until you've paid off your debt; I am not going to wait until you've duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family.'"¹ And we, like the older brother, say "huh?" Where is the justice in that? As much as we don't always like the wrath of God as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, here is one place where we might not mind it so much. We've had that family member come back groveling only to hurt us again. We've tried to forgive, only to be frustrated again. We learned from hard knocks that broken trust is like a crystal glass dropped on a tile floor, almost impossible to put back together.

We stand alongside the older brother stewing in self-righteousness, looking in the window at the extravagant party and that smile on the younger brother's face, thinking, 'Humph, dad always did like you better.' Only to feel the gentle rub of our father on our backs and the warmth of his breath on our necks, did you notice that the father goes out to both? Not because it was the right thing to do, in fact in Jesus' culture both sons are being disrespectful. In Jesus' culture, the father's actions caused many frowns to form and heads to be scratched. The father wants the older son to join the party, the father wants the older son to claim and live into his relationship with his brother. And then, an abrupt ending, because friends we are still living this story, we are still trying to figure out what happens next.

That is why we keep coming back to this parable, because we come at different points in our life. Does the older brother go inside and join the party? Well, do we call a friend who we think is in the wrong? Do we seek open conversation or cling to our own correctness? Does the younger brother go outside with a plate full of food as some kind of symbolic peace offering when he sees his brother pacing back and forth, would we? The parable confounds us. Just as the parable does not wrap up in some sitcom like everything works out for the best kind of positive thinking, neither do our lives. To be steeped in the sacred is not just about looking to the sunny side of life, but it is about living in the foggy, in-between moments when we feel conflicted and uncertain about how things, or if things, will work out. To be steeped in the sacred is about trust, not in ourselves or our plans, but in

¹ The Prodigal God by Timothy Keller, pg. 22-23

the One who invites us into relationship and the One who offers us amazing grace and love, only to challenge us to share that grace and love with others.

In all the variety of relationships that are a part of your life right now, when do you feel like the brother standing outside the window stewing? Where do you feel like another person is offering you grace-filled love you could not earn? Where do you feel like the father staring out the window longing for the possibility of reconciliation? Where are you uncertain about which character's sandals you are wearing? Part of the Lenten journey is inward; it is reflective and connective to the One who claims us as beloved. Part of the Lenten journey is about seeing and sensing creation, God's handiwork awakening with a spring around us. Part of the Lenten journey is paying attention to our relationships with others, and all the complexity and blessing those connections bring.

Friends, as we inch closer to Holy Week, may this trinity of connection to God, connection to creation and connection to each other keep calling us to rely upon and be open to the One who waits, the One who watches and the One who flings arms wide open to us the moment we reach out, not wanting to hear our prepared speech, but wanting to celebrate and welcome us home.

Thanks be to God and all the people said, "Amen".