

“SUNDAY SCHOOL REVISITED: IV - ‘CAN I COME HOME?’”

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Luke 15:11-32

Of all the stories in the Bible, today’s Gospel lesson is one of my favorites to teach. Why? Well, because everyone knows it pretty well, but more so because it’s one of those times when I have no trouble getting people to participate in a discussion.

You know, sometimes in a class, I talk about the lesson and then I ask a question, and there’s dead silence. (Actually, that happens sometimes in staff meetings when we’re discussing the lesson I’ll be preaching on the next Sunday. I’ll ask them something, and there’s dead silence.)

Well, I guarantee you, I never have to worry about dead silence after someone reads the story of the prodigal son, because it seems that people have almost a visceral reaction when they hear it. And I could tell you what that reaction will be even before I hear it (that is, if I’m teaching to a church crowd).

The reaction nine times out of ten will be this - I understand why the older brother is mad. I get it! He did everything right. He was the good son. He followed the rules. He honored his responsibility. He ended up with twice the work because his good-for-nothing, carefree younger brother went off to sow his wild oats. I get why the older brother is mad. I’d be mad too. It isn’t fair.

Am I right? Did that run through your mind as the lesson was being read? I mean, after all, aren’t we sort of the older brother in the story? We’re here in church, aren’t we? We’re doing the right thing. We’re here worshipping God on a Sunday morning when we could be sitting home reading the newspaper, or on the golf course, or shopping, or doing who know’s what. We’re taking Sunday School classes, and going on mission trips, and giving so that we can have more space in our church. We’re the older brother, aren’t we? So it’s no wonder we might be a little perturbed at what the father did in the story!

Well, we’re not alone. Look back at the lesson and remember that the reason Jesus told this story in the first place is that some people back then were pretty perturbed too. They were the scribes and Pharisees. They didn’t like the way things were going. They didn’t like the people with whom Jesus was hanging

out.

They were what the scribes and Pharisees considered to be “undesirables.” They didn’t like that Jesus was hanging out with them, and more importantly, treating them like they were worth something, worth maybe as much as the scribes and Pharisees, come to think of it - and so they made it clear they were not happy.

So Jesus told them this now famous story - what has come to be known as the story of the Prodigal Son. Today we’re going to look at it again, but today I want to invite us to look at it a little differently, with a little different twist on the title. Today, I want us to consider this the story of the Prodigal Sons - plural.

You know what prodigal means, don’t you? Extravagant (not in a good way), wasteful, squanderer - and let me add a fourth word of my own - lost. That’s the key word upon which I’d like us to focus together this morning - lost. This story Jesus tells is all about being lost.

The younger son in the story clearly has lost his way. We see that from the very beginning. He wants out of the family routine, he wants the money now that would have been coming his way when his father died, he wants to go and have some adventures, be footloose and fancy free, not tied down in any way. And he does just that. His father gives him his share of the inheritance and off he goes to have a great old time, and it seems he does, for quite some time. Until it’s all gone - he has squandered everything. It’s gone, and now he’s stuck. He’s got nothing and no one. He’s out in the middle of nowhere - he is lost. And he knows it.

You ever gotten lost before? I’m not talking the same kind of lost as this young man, just plain old lost. I remember one day I went out for a ride. (This was in the days before I had a GPS, and of course, I didn’t have a map with me.) Well, I just took off and I remember being out in western Cecil County. I turned down one road and then another and another and before I knew it, I had no idea where I was, and no idea how to get back to any semblance of civilization. Now, it doesn’t seem like a big deal to be lost in the wilds of western Cecil County, but it seemed that I was going deeper and deeper into the woods, and it was getting darker and darker, and I have to tell you, I got a little scared. I could see myself just going around in circles forever, and never finding my way out. Every turn just seemed to lead me deeper into nothingness. More than once on that fateful trip, I thought about how stupid I was to not have a map or a phone with me. I knew I was lost, and I knew I deserved to be lost! It was a scary feeling.

Sometimes, friends, you know you’re lost. You know you’ve made a bad decision, you know you’ve squandered something precious, you know are in a bad way. Sometimes, you know you’re lost.

This young man did. He hit the bottom of the barrel, and made the decision to go back home, knowing that he had no right to expect anything of his father but to be treated as one of his hired hands. And that would be all right with him - at least he would have food to eat and a place to lay his head. He was lost, and he knew it, and headed home.

He was ready to throw himself at his father's feet, to throw himself on his father's mercy, to confess all of his sins. He was ready to do whatever it took to get back into the good graces of his father. Can't you just see him rehearsing his speech as he walks up to the road to his family's home?

But he doesn't have a chance to say a word, because before he knows it, his father is flying down the road toward him, with arms spread wide open ready to embrace him deeply. He doesn't have a chance to say anything before his father opens up his arms, and opens up his heart, kisses him and welcomes him home. Even then, when he offers his confession, it's as if his father almost sloughs it off, as he calls his servants to prepare a party.

Friends, sometimes you know you're lost. The younger son, this Prodigal Son, knew it, and all he wanted to do was come home.

Sometimes you know you're lost.

And sometimes you don't. The other son, the older son, didn't. He would have never said that he was lost, after all, he was the one who had it all together. He was "the good son," the responsible son, the hard-working, committed son. He knew where he was, and what he was doing - he was following all the rules.

Yet, even though, he never physically left, the older son was about as lost as the younger one. Look at what he did in this story. As the party is starting for his younger brother, he hears all the ruckus and comes to find out what's going on. He finds out, to his disbelief and probably disgust, that his bratty younger brother who had taken off lock, stock and barrel and left him behind holding the bag, was back, and not only was he back, but their father had clothed him in his finest, put a ring on his finger, and was throwing a big, huge party for him!

He couldn't believe it, and he wouldn't accept it. He was hopping mad, and he told his father so. And no matter what his father said to try and to calm him down, the older son would hear nothing of it, and refused to go in to the party. Oh, he was lost, and he didn't even know it.

He was lost in self-pity, self-righteousness, jealousy. He was lost in legalism, so busy keeping score that he couldn't recognize grace when it was staring

him in the face. He was lost in anger. He was so lost in his bitterness at his brother, that he forgot everything that he himself had been given.

He forgot that while his brother was just now enjoying his father's presence, he himself had had that companionship all the time. He forgot that he had been blessed to work by his father's side. He forgot that he had been successful in farming the land, and reaping the harvest, and knowing the joy of a job well done. He forgot that he had had clothes on his back, and food on his table, and the joy of being part of a loving family - all the time. He forgot all of the constant good things that he had had in his life, in his anger over the sudden celebration and joy his brother was experiencing. He was lost, as surely as his brother had been.

Sometimes, like the younger brother, you're lost and you know it; but sometimes, like the older one, you don't. The good news of the Gospel is that, either way, someone is looking for you, reaching out to you, wanting to draw you in, and celebrate you. And not just waiting for you to arrive, but running out to embrace you and draw you in!

And that someone is God Himself. Our home is in God. Every once in a while we get lost. Sometimes we know it, and sometimes we don't. But always, the answer to the question "Can I come home?" is yes, yes, yes! We can never be so lost that God will not welcome us home with open arms and amazing grace.

I'm sure some of you have heard the story I'm about to tell, but hear it again if you have, for it is a classic retelling of this Gospel lesson.

It seems that once there was a young man who left home to go to San Francisco and enjoy the good life. And live it he did, until all his money was gone, and he hit rock bottom. Finally, in desperation, he wrote a letter to his parents. "Dear Mom and Dad, I have sinned deeply against you. I have sinned against you and I have sinned against God and I am not worthy to be called your son. There is no reason for you to love me or welcome me back home. I am at the bottom of the barrel and I need to come back home. I hope that you will let me. I have been given a train ticket to get me back home. The train comes past our farm on the way to the station - right past our farmhouse. If you want me to come home, please put a white towel on the clothesline out in the back yard near the tracks. If there's a towel there, I'll know I can come home. If there isn't, I will understand and stay away."

A few days later, he boards the train, and the closer it gets to his hometown, the more nervous he is. There was no reason in the world why his parents should let him come home, after all he had done to them. He was so nervous, he was afraid to look. So he asked the man sitting next to him to look for him. He said, "In just a minute we'll come around a bend and there will be a farmhouse on the

left. There will be a clothesline in the backyard. Will you do me a favor and look for me and see if there's a white towel hanging on the clothesline?"

Well, the train went around the corner, and the young man's heart was absolutely racing. The man said, "Look, look! Open your eyes!" And you know what he saw? The whole clothesline was covered with white towels. And not only that - The trees were covered with white sheets. The barn roof was covered with white sheets. The fence was covered with white sheets. There was white everywhere!

Just like an old father running down a road to embrace his prodigal son. Yes, you can come home, no matter how lost you've been or are, no matter what. You can come home, because God not only waits for you, but is running to meet you and hold you in His arms. That is the good news of this wonderful Sunday School lesson, and that is, indeed, the good news of the Gospel.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.