

Sermon: Home is Where the Heart is

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

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This is one of the best known stories of the Bible and maybe of western literature, the story of the prodigal son. It is often told and explained from the more modern perspective of the son; his sin, his repentance and his return into the waiting arms of the father. Despite there being no titles in the original texts, we've come to call the story the Prodigal Son. But what first century Mediterranean hearers of this story would have had in their focused was not so much the son but the father. For Jesus told this story in an honor culture where one's honor, keeping and saving face we might say, was absolutely paramount. Few of us from a modern perspective would have much difficulty believing that what the father did in receiving the son back was a good and beautiful thing. However from a first century perspective there would be a good amount of doubt that the father's actions were right in any way.

If a son were to diss his father as the prodigal son did, by asking for his inheritance, by treating his father as though he were already dead, and then leave his family and community for the big city to squander all his money on wild living, it would be akin to this son murdering his own father and his father's name. The only appropriate response a father could give then would be to disown the son to protect the family name. But not only does the father give him the inheritance he asks for in the first place – which in and of itself would have been scandalous to people around town– but then when his son returns with his tail between his legs, his father receives him back into the family with a celebration to publicly and completely welcome him back to his home.

The first century hearer would more likely call this story the prodigal father – a reckless and wayward member of the community who chose the codling and reconciliation with his son over the good name of his family and even his community. The father surely lost the respect of most all the people around him. He utterly lost face through his actions. The older son's response is just the beginning and suggests the dismay with which the people around this man would have received his actions.

But what the father was safeguarding was something in his mind that was far greater than the family name or societies mores or his own reputation. He was safeguarding HOME for his son so that his son had a place to return to that he could still call his own, that he could call his home, no matter what. And this, Jesus seems to be suggesting, is the way of God, the promise of God; that no matter where our lives take us, no matter what decisions we've made that we have regretted, no matter the amount of squandering of the gifts we've been given, no matter how far away we have wandered from our truth and our true home over the course of our lives, when we've "watched earth's vane shadows flee," as the hymn goes, "change and decay in all around we see" that when we turn even then to make our way back, we will be welcomed with open arms to our home, to that place where we can "abide".

The only and greatest mistake that we can make is to believe ourselves too far gone, too deeply lost, to ever find our way back home... or to believe that having left there is no home to return to again. For some of us that place we call home is a literal place of our upbringing, the fires of which are still tended by our parents and by others who hold that place through their own stability despite our having traveled and settled elsewhere. For others of us our parents have long since gone or are no longer capable of holding home for us and our homeland is the place that holds distant memories of who and where we used to be and maybe the graves of those who have come before us.

As many of you know, a couple of week's ago I went to Louisville, Kentucky to receive the grant for my sabbatical from the Louisville Institute. I found it interesting that this institute was offering such a grant given that Louisville is my birthplace, the place where my grandparents and parents grew up and lived most of their lives. The conference that I attended there was good and it was interesting to gather with other recipients of the grant and to hear about their ministries and their sabbaticals and to get some good advice about taking my own sabbatical this summer, but what made those two and half days particularly powerful for me was the fact that where they brought us to spend those days was to the Louisville Seminary which was literally in the neighborhood of where my dad went to elementary school and where my grandfather pastored for 20 years a Baptist church called Crescent Hill and where my grandmother and papa on the other side of my family lived on Alta Avenue and literally within walking distance of the

graveyard where all 4 of my grandparents on both sides of my family are buried. It's a huge and lovely cemetery and although I didn't have enough time to find their graves and visit, I did have an hour one afternoon to walk through Cherokee park. That was the park where my grandmother Claire, after whom we named Augusta Claire, would always take us on walks when we would visit her when I was a child. It was the first time I had walked there since I was 10, 11, 12 years old. And as I walked that familiar park the presence of my family was very much alive to me. Growing up for most of my formative years in Virginia and my travels out west and living in Connecticut for the beginning of my adult life, and out in Berkeley, CA for my seminary years and now here in Vermont for close to 10 years now, it was significant for me and my somewhat transient self to be walking on what dawned on me was my homeland, the land of my ancestors, if I could claim any place as such. All the dead who are connected to that land and who make up my lineage – Rollin, Delma, Claire, Garner, Mac – and those still living – Ellen, David, John, Kenny, Betty, Shawn (a childhood friend who lives there now), have held that home for me so that I can hold that home within me wherever my life might take me from here. And then as we prepare to go to Scotland this summer during my sabbatical it feels as though I am going to be stepping even more deeply back into a land of my ancestors, the Petries and MacReynolds and Douglasses, to remember what makes up the home that I carry within me even now and that my children are carrying and will always carry within them as well. I am there and yet always in process of returning there and that is my journey.

It was the prodigal father that held that home for his lost son who had wondered so far away that he had lost all sense of roots and connection and life, so that eventually when he returned further down the road he would know that he still belonged.

Who are the people around us who feel estranged and lost, who are homeless on some level or another, who have lost their sense of homeland and how can we safeguard for them a sense of their return home though they may have wondered far and wide and though they may feel undeserving of a home?

How has that been safeguarded for each of us by parents, or if our parents were unable to do that for us for whatever reason, by those surrogate mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers who have made home through their love?

What reconciliation are we being called to for God's higher purpose of homemaking among one another?

We all have our stories of where home was where we once did abide, how we left it one day to follow some sense of what we must do and where we must go, and now how we are returning, even now, ever returning. The story of our faith is this same story as well, as it is recorded from Genesis all the way through the New Testament to the book of Revelation, through Christian history and to the present day; the story of a place of union and love and home, a place called Eden, then the falling away and the journey out of that place even unto a place of great suffering and death where is asked "why, O God, have you forsaken me", but the story does not end until finally we are found by open and loving arms and welcomed home again. "My son was dead but is now alive, he was lost but is now found!"

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death O Lord abide with me.