

Welcome Home

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Text: St. Luke 15: 11-32

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Marsha was sitting quietly in her living room one spring morning, listening to Bach, the “Saint Matthew Passion.” She found herself moved deeply by the beauty of Bach’s music, of course, but also by the text describing the love of God that culminates in an act of supreme self-giving in the face of cruelty. Marsha is Jewish, and in those moments, listening to the pivotal Christian story, she felt a resonance that inspired her beyond words,

As she sat there, she also heard the mail drop through the slot in her front door. She waited until the end of the “Passion,” then went to retrieve the mail. Among the letters and bills was a flyer from a new Christian church not far from her house. The flyer looked just like the sort of slick marketing brochure you might receive from a bank or an upscale business. It advertised ample free parking, reliable child-care, and a variety of amenities for working-out and visiting with friends over a cappuccino. But to Marsha’s surprise there was not a word in the flyer about why people might want to gather there for spiritual purposes or who they might be worshiping.

The disjunction between the power of the simple message of God’s love in Jesus Christ expressed in Bach’s “Passion” and the slick but superficial advertising piece in the mail launched Marsha on a quest that caused her to write one of the most interesting dissertations any graduate student has ever written in the sociology department at Princeton University, and the book which came from it, titled “All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism.”

In a nutshell, here’s what Marsha Witten discovered. And it relates directly on our Gospel lesson today, which I will read in just a moment.

Dr. Witten decided to ask pastors across the country to send her a copy of the sermon to which they thought their people had most related. After examining hundreds of these sermons from ministers across the United States, from fundamentalist and neo-evangelical to mainline and liberal Protestant congregations, Marsha found that one text stood out as THE favorite biblical story for the overwhelming majority of Protestant Christians in our country: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. She also discovered that this story, so rich, so complex, so multifaceted and open-ended that it invites scores of interpretations had been reduced to one single message: “All is forgiven.”

Now, there are a few things I want to say before we engage this text this morning.

First, I think it is great that there’s something on which Christians of every theological and ideological stripe can agree. That’s almost a miracle these days.

Second, I also believe that God welcomes absolutely everyone because God created everyone, and God loves everyone whom God created.

And, third, I believe deeply that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, and that God longs for nothing so much as to enfold us all in love and mercy and forgiveness that knows no limits.

And this forgiveness of God runs through this text of scripture like it runs through the Bible.

But I also believe that Marsha Witten, religiously an outsider to the Christian community, discerns a problem we have that tends to place the gospel in a straight-jacket and, ultimately, that undercuts the good news. It is the tendency to reduce the richness of the gospel to one single idea, even if it happens to be a very good idea.

So, just for a few moments, let's imagine we've never heard this story before. Let's place ourselves in the path of the oncoming parable, as much as we can, as Jesus originally told it and as people originally heard it. And to help us do that, I've drafted an excellent New Testament scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, into our service to provide a fresh translation.

Let us hear the good news of the gospel:

“Some man had two sons. And said the younger of them to the father, “Father, give to me the portion of the property that is falling to me. And he divided between them the life. And after not many days, gathering together all, the younger son took a journey into a far region, and there he scattered the property through excessive living. And having spent all, there was a strong famine in that region, and he himself began to be in need. And going, he became joined to one of the citizens of that region, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was desiring to be filled from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one was giving to him. And coming to himself, he said, ‘how many hired laborers of my father are abounding of bread, but I by famine here am lost?’ Getting up, I shall go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired laborers.’ And rising up, he went toward his father. And yet when he was far off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and running, fell upon his neck and continually kissed him. And said the son to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son.’

“And said the father to his servants, ‘Quick carry out a robe, the first, and put it on him, and give the ring to his hand and sandals to the feet. And bring the calf, the grain-fed one, sacrifice and, eating, we may rejoice. Because this, my son, was dead, and he came back to life; he had been lost, and was found.’ And they began to rejoice.

“And his son, the elder, was in the field, and as he, coming, drew near the house, he heard symphony and chorus. And calling over one of the servants he inquired what these things might be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has sacrificed the grain-fed calf, because he received him healthy.’ And he became angry, and he did not want to go in. And his father, going out, comforted/urged him. And answering, he said to his father, ‘Look, all these years I am slaving for you, and not one commandment of yours have I passed by, and for me not one young goat did you give so that with my friends I might rejoice. But when your son, this one, the one who ate up your life with prostitutes came, you sacrificed for him the grain-fed calf.

“And he said to him, ‘Child, you always with me are, and everything that is mine is yours. But it remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice, because your brother, this one, was dead, and lived to life, and being lost, even he was found.’” (Luke 15: 11-32, Amy-Jill Levine, “Short Stories by Jesus,” HarperOne, 2014, pp. 27-37; 50-73)

This is the Good News of the Gospel.

This morning I want us to approach this parable at its most basic level, the way a person who has never before heard the story might hear it. And at this most basic level this story is the story of a father who didn't notice that he had lost his two sons until it was almost too late to make his family whole; it is the story about two sons who struggle in the lonely hells they constructed of their own lives.

Really it is a very ordinary story. There's nothing exotic or even religious here, nothing we haven't seen, or heard, or experienced in life. There are two sons, an older and a younger. The younger came to the father and asked for his share of the inheritance - not at all uncommon. A lot of young people ask for much the same thing today to get their start in life, to set up a business, or to buy their first home. But, in this case, the son wasted it all. That's why we call him "prodigal." He burned through every penny he had been given, indulging various appetites, not thinking about the future or planning for the inevitable downturns. He was all risk and no prudence. And when a famine hit the land, he had nothing to carry him through, and all his new friends deserted him, and strangers were no help at all. He ends up hungry, doing nasty work. So, hat in hand, he goes home. As Robert Frost famously said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

And when he does return home, his father (who had been hoping he'd come back) saw him coming down the road and ran out to meet him. And before he can even get his carefully prepared speech out of his mouth, the father is hugging him, and calling for new clothes, and ordering for sacrifices to be made and a celebration to start.

The father seems to think of everything to have a great welcome home party. Hmmm.

Well, almost everything.

He forgot to tell his elder son that his brother has returned so that he could be involved in his younger brother's welcome home.

The next thing we learn in the story is that the elder brother, who had been working in the fields all day long, first learns what the commotion at the house is about from a servant. And he is angry. He is so angry. Probably he's feeling a lot of other things too: hurt that his father didn't miss him; embarrassed that he learned about his brother's return from a servant, left-out and overlooked; he feels taken for granted (yet again!). He feels rising in his throat the pent-up resentment that has been festering for ages.

And that's when the father gets word that his older son won't come to the party.

Notice this: it is only then, when the word reaches the father that his older son refuses to come into the celebration, that the father takes note of him at all. Only when the squeaky wheel begins to squeal! And when the father comes out of the house to his older son, this young man explodes with resentment. He spills out his broken heart to his father.

The father appears to hear him, and he offers the words that he as a father may always have assumed, but, honestly, these are the very words he should have expressed often to his older son. "You are always

at my side, and everything I have is yours.”

And then he speaks the logic of a grieving father, “but it remains necessary to celebrate because your brother, starving to death, lost to us, has returned home.” It’s as though he is pleading.

I’m not sure I have ever read a story that expresses the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth with such force. The good news of Jesus Christ doesn’t hover twelve feet off the ground, high above our heads, lost in abstractions. Jesus is human, like us. And Jesus knows the heart-ache we know as sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, as family members, as people torn and aching from old wounds unhealed, as people building families of those who are not our blood relatives, as human beings who have suffered loss and loneliness and cannot explain what strange, invisible forces keep us apart.

The Jesus we discover in his telling of this story understands the haunting wisdom of which the songwriter Leonard Cohen sang in his “Song of Bernadette.” “We’ve been around. We fall. We fly. We mostly fall, we mostly run. And every now and then we try to mend the damage that we’ve done.”

This parable is left wide open at the end with all the wounds left open too. The damage has been done. Now, how does it get mended?

Unlike so many parables, we are left hanging with the father and his older son standing together outside the party. The younger son, it seems, is inside the house partying away oblivious to the conversation outside. This parable is not so neatly tied up in a religious bow as perhaps St. Luke would have preferred in his editorial comments. This is the kind of story that comes home with us, like that movie we can’t get out of our heads or that novel we can’t shake months after reading it.

As painful as this story is to read, reading it, I am filled today with gratitude. Jesus really was human. The incarnation is not an empty doctrine. Jesus does bear our humanity, not some theoretical humanity carved from holy blocks of marble. Jesus really does speak good news to us in the midst of the lives we actually live, even if that news comes with warnings.

Today whether we identify with the prodigal or the overly-prudent sibling, whether the far country into which we’ve journeyed is geographically distant or only on the other end of the couch; this morning, even if we are that father or mother or friend who didn’t notice the urge to run away, the resentment building, in someone with whom we live; today whether we were overly coddled or taken for granted, there’s a message for us all: Welcome home.

Welcome home wherever you find yourself, whether you have wandered far and lost much, or have just come in sweating from the fields of duty.

Welcome home whether you are the parent who looks down the road longing to see a child return or the parent who hasn’t yet noticed the child who is taken for granted.

Welcome home to that family within or that family beyond the families into which we were born.

Welcome home especially to this table, this fellowship, into the companionship of these brothers and sisters, without whom we can never be all we are meant to be.