

Lent 4C 2  
Peace, Seattle  
March 14, 2010 epk  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

## **COMING HOME**

### **He was three years old when it happened.**

He'd been playing with the other kids right outside our seminary apartment, and seemed content enough, so I ducked inside to check on something--what it was I can't remember.

Through the window of our third floor apartment I could hear the playground voices in the air, and it seemed to me that my son Nathan would be fine out there for a little while in the company of the others.

But a few minutes later, when I looked out the window, he was gone.

I went out and began calling his name. Nothing. And with it being close to dinnertime, the other children had already slipped away to their homes, leaving the playground empty.

### **I swallowed hard. What had I been thinking?**

I told my wife he was missing, and she joined the search. We checked all the usual places, but he wasn't there.

Adrenalin began to kick in now, as my mind raced toward other possibilities.

- There was the bus stop, just down the street, and the highway just beyond that.
- There was the trail through the woods to upper campus, and the wetlands not far from our apartment.

### **As the list of possible whereabouts grew, so did my sense of panic.**

I raced up the trail, but found no sign of him. The wetlands were too difficult to get to, thank God, he wouldn't be there...though I looked any way.

I came back to check in, and finding him still missing, grabbed my bike and headed for the old street car trail. The further away from home I got, the more panicked I became.

**What if...what if...what if...**

### **After nearly an hour I had exhausted every possibility I could think of. But I was afraid to go back home, afraid he wouldn't be there.**

But that, finally, was where I needed to go. And so, reluctantly, I did, my stomach in my throat.

Parking my bike I began walking slowly up the stairwell when a familiar little voice caught my ear! I bounded up the stairs to the apartment and there he was, sitting in his highchair, eating dinner as if nothing had happened!

### **I collapsed on the floor, flooded with relief and with tears. My son was safe and sound. My life was given back to me.**

**When your son is 3**, you go looking for him and you don't stop searching until you find him.

**But when he's 23**, you begin to understand that he has to go away in order to find himself.

**So I understand, I think, why the Father of our parable had to let his son go.  
And I feel his joy at welcoming him back.**

What does it mean, to come home again after all that water has passed under the bridge?  
To negotiate the territory of regret and loss and forgiveness?

**The older brother**, who hasn't lived as long outside the family, out in the world, and who has labored under a misapprehension of his own identity in relation to the father, wants to exact a price from his wayward younger brother...and no price is too high, as far as he's concerned.

**Forgiveness?! Not now. Not yet.** Let him show some proper repentance for a good long while.  
And then, maybe.

**German pastor Helmut Thielicke spoke of this struggle when he wrote:**

"We make of forgiveness a law of reciprocity. We say, "very well, if the other fellow is sorry and begs my pardon, I will forgive him, then I'll give in." And this never works. For then both of us say to ourselves, "The other fellow has to make the first move." And then I watch like a hawk to see whether the other person will flash a signal to me with his eyes or whether I can detect some small hint between the lines of his letter that shows that he is sorry. I am always on the point of forgiving...but I never forgive. I am far too just."<sup>1</sup>

The complex emotional dynamic between the characters of our parable – a father and his two sons – provides enough raw material to keep a family systems therapist gainfully employed for some time to come.

The more layers you peel back, the more multifaceted and nuanced the story becomes.  
The more you enter the worldview of each respective character, the more you discover that this story raises more questions than it gives answers.

But the center of the story, the pulsing heart and the nut impossible to crack, is and will always be the Father's unrelenting love.

**The older brother wants justice.  
But the father knows that it is mercy, not justice, that allows broken relationships to heal; it is mercy which trumps everything.**

**The elder brother feels the rejection that rightfully belongs to his younger brother.**  
But the Father embraces both of them with a compassion more encompassing than either of them can imagine.

Henri Nouwen writes:

"The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about a love that existed before any

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<sup>1</sup> From *Waiting*. Quoted in *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Philip D. Yancey. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. Page 91.

rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place.” We are, each one of us, as precious and as irreplaceable to our heavenly Father, as our own children are to us, and perhaps (if that is possible) even more so. For his capacity to love us and to love all exceeds any measure we can dream up—no matter how sublime or ghastly.

In baptism, God places the choicest robe around our shoulders, and in doing so God recognizes, like the father of our story, that a rebirth has taken place and must be celebrated.

**When we are clothed in Christ, the old categories don't hold sway any more.  
We're as different as a pig's trough is from a banqueting table.**

Perhaps our deepest challenge is remembering this; and remembering who we are.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;” Paul writes, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

When we remember that, when we remember who we are and who we are becoming thanks to the Fathers unrelenting love and to another Son's ultimate act of self-giving, we can exchange our “human point of view”—the view that insists on justice before and above all things—for the view of ourselves as daughters and sons reconciled to God through the gift of Christ Jesus, and called to the vocation of being reconcilers in the world.

And relationship by relationship, family by family, community by community, day by day, God's grace and welcome will spread through our lives and in the world.

Amen.