

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

March 27, 2022 – LENT 4, YEAR C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*You Can Go Home Again*”

Joshua 5:9-12 (The Lord provided for the Israelites every step of their desert journey)
Psalm 32 (Happy are they whose sins are forgiven)
2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (A plea to be reconciled to God, through Christ)
St. Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son / the merciful father)

A minister was speaking to his Sunday school about the things money can't buy. “It can't buy happiness and it can't buy love” he told them. Driving his point home he asked, “What would you do if I offered you \$1,000 not to love your mother and father?” Stunned silence ensued. Finally a small voice queried, “How much would you give me not to love my little sister?”¹

I can imagine the stay-at-home brother in today's Gospel story was thinking somewhat along the same lines about his newly returned debauched, spendthrift, reckless younger brother. He would probably prefer being paid to *hate* his brother, rather than take the much harder step of *forgiving* his sibling.

When hearing this familiar parable, we often focus almost exclusively on the forgiveness extended to the prodigal son by his merciful father. We tend to forget that the reappearance of the younger son presented an occasion for his older brother to learn the importance of mercy.

Motivational author Pamela Dugdale wrote: “Siblings are the people we practice on, the people who teach us about fairness and cooperation and kindness and caring—quite often the hard way.”² The return of his delinquent brother, and the unconditional mercy shown to this young man by his father, was an opportunity for the long-suffering sibling to learn about kindness and caring—and definitely, the hard way.

The younger son had presumptuously asked for his inheritance even before his father died because he wanted to sow his wild oats, find himself, travel far from home, and a myriad of other selfish desires. When things didn't work out for him, what made him think he could ever return to his family?

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” poet Robert Frost once penned so poignantly. The lost son knew this, and, in his shame, turned back toward home and the father he had treated so callously. As badly as he had screwed-up, he figured he might at least become one of his dad's *servants*. (St. Luke never says anything about whether the runaway missed his older brother.)

A very tender moment occurs in this parable when we read “while he [the son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” Did the father simply have a long time to get over being mad at his son? Maybe.

But the fact that he was willing to give the boy his inheritance early—even though the demand was not right—shows a patient and understanding character. People who are patient and understanding also tend to be compassionate and forgiving. This was the father's character, and Jesus tells this story as a parable, that is, a symbolic tale, in which the merciful Father is God, and the sinful son is each of us. Remember last Sunday's sermon, in which I said God is always willing to forgive us, as long as we repent? The wayward son repented and returned to the One who loved him.

Let's get back to the older son, the one who had respectfully and obediently worked for his father all these years, and doesn't feel he's getting any credit for it, while the ne'er-do-well is getting a lollapalooza of a shindig in his honor! But is the older son such a good guy after all?

Commenting on this parable, one Bible scholar writes: “Neither son in this story ... has a real relationship with the father. The younger son views the father as a source from which he can derive sufficient funds to live it up as he pleases. He takes his father's goodness for granted, abuses it, and only in the later sense of sorrow and loss is able to perceive the true character of the one of whose goodness he took advantage.

The elder son can relate to his father only in a sense of being duty-bound, he is more of a slave than a son; and so, he never really experiences the love and generosity of the father.”³

Either way, both children have initially failed to grasp the kind, loving, and merciful nature of their parent’s character. And aren’t we guilty, at times, of the same nearsightedness toward God? For whatever reason—either we’ve taken God for granted because He’s always with us, or we’ve run far in the opposite direction—myopically we miss the goodness with which the Lord wants to bless us. Somehow, we overlook or forget that God is infinitely loving, grace-filled, and forgiving. As Psalm 145:8 (ESV) reminds us “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

For Jesus, this is really a story about the Father. This story could be called the story of the Parent who loved and gave unconditionally, in three powerful ways.

First, His love was given freely. He gave the prodigal his portion of the inheritance, when he asked for it; no strings attached. The Parent did not attempt to control what the child did with it. When the prodigal chose to waste it, he was free to do so. This free giving of love was seen again when the son returned home. The Parent did not say, “when you’ve been good, and repaid your debt, then I will restore you to the family.” No, He “saw him a far way off, and ran to him.” He re clothed, redecorated, and gave a party to celebrate the return. There were no conditions.

The second way the Parent loved was in creating an environment of caring and acceptance in the home. When the Prodigal “came to himself” he knew he could go home. There is no sign of any questioning in the story. He was sure he could go home. When the older brother was angry about what he perceived to be unfair treatment, he knew he could speak with the Parent and not hold back how he felt. These are signs of a loving, accepting environment.

The third way the Parent loved was by giving. He gave the prodigal a robe, a ring, an embrace, and a celebration. He gave the older brother, “all that I have....” It is impossible to love without giving. This lavish giving out of unconditional love is the primary evidence of God’s presence among us.

This truly is a story about God. God who is present in places and relationships where love is freely given. God who is present in environments where love is so abundant that no one hesitates to be vulnerable, for fear of love’s absence. God is present where love is lavish.

This story about God’s love is also a story about us. We, too are either the prodigal or the older brother, and some of us are a mix of both. The issue for us is, do we truly believe in God’s freely given environment of lavish, unconditional love? Can we open our eyes and hearts to perceive it?

St. Luke writes that the prodigal “came to himself,” and repented of his misdeeds. We, too, are called to “come to ourselves,” repenting of our errors, weaknesses, and wrongdoing, so that we can experience remorse, relief, and release, in the light of God’s mercy. Remorse because we accept and recognize our personal responsibility for what has been sinful and stupid in our lives. Relief, because as those who are forgiven, we experience peace and joy rather than conflict and despair. Release because now we can enjoy freedom rather than captivity.⁴

So, if you are a prodigal, go home to the goodness that awaits you! If you are an older brother, open your eyes to the goodness around you! And If you are a mix of the two, go home with your eyes open, and join the party, because God is hosting it for *everyone* who comes to Him! Whether you’ve been good all along, but out of touch with the source of your faithful obedience, or you’ve been running the other way, thinking, feeling, or doing all the wrong things and are forced to return to the source of your life and hope, the Lord is there for, and with you.

The author Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, “You can’t go home again.” Well, maybe that’s true in this world, but it’s never the case in the Kingdom of God. Jesus makes sure the welcome mat is always out ... and He’ll leave the light on for you. *Amen.*

¹ “What Money Can’t Buy,” (anon.) [Bible.org](https://bible.org/node/14712) <https://bible.org/node/14712> 22 March 2022

² Pamela Dugdale, [BookReporter.com](https://www.bookreporter.com/content/pamela-dugdale) <https://www.bookreporter.com/content/pamela-dugdale> 22 March 2022.

³ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Year C, Lent/Easter: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, (Nashville, Abingdon 1994), p.57.

⁴ Adapt. J. Hugh Magers, “The Story of the Prodigal Son Is ...” 22 March 1998, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-story-of-the-prodigal-son-is-lent-4-c-1998/), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-story-of-the-prodigal-son-is-lent-4-c-1998/> 22 March 2022.