

“Home Base”

Luke 15:11-32

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It has the reputation of being the most familiar of Jesus’ parables and the greatest story ever told. I’m not sure the religious leaders listening to it that day would agree with that second part. By this time, they were critical of just about everything Jesus said and did, so this parable, which portrayed them as the angry elder brother of the Prodigal Son, would only upset them more.

This story is about a father and his two sons. The younger one asked for his inheritance and left home, apparently with a great deal of money and very little maturity.

The way Jesus told the parable, we get the impression this boy was home-sick, not homesick in the traditional sense, but sick of home. The request for an inheritance before a parent died was both disrespectful and highly unusual. It reveals this boy must have been miserable and eager to find what he believed would be a better way to live.

You also have to wonder if the Prodigal’s father granted this request reluctantly. Surely, he knew his son was not wise enough to handle his money and freedom responsibly.

Why didn’t he talk him out of going or simply deny his request? Perhaps he did on previous occasions, but this time his persistent son prevailed.

Let me caution you not to be too hard on this father. There comes a time when every parent must open his or her hands and let a child go. Quite frankly, I’m not sure any parent is ever ready to do this.

It did not take this boy long to go through all that money and become destitute. His self-indulgent, irresponsible and reckless lifestyle led him straight to a life of poverty.

To survive during a famine when no one showed him any compassion or hospitality, he worked on a pig farm, a humiliating job given his background. What made matters worse was there were days when all he had to eat was the food he was throwing to the pigs.

He was in a mess, and he knew it. He also realized he had no one to blame but himself. Under these dire and desperate circumstances, he came to his senses and wisely decided to go home where he would plead for mercy from his dad.

He rehearsed a speech he hoped would get him in the door and make it possible for him to stay on the family farm. It was laced with humility, confession and repentance. It included a willingness to become an indentured servant rather than a beloved and honored member of the family.

In other words, he would do whatever was necessary to move back home. Trying to survive in a dangerous and scary world alone was not a sustainable option.

It turns out his father had no intention of disowning him and casting him away. As soon as his father saw him coming down the lane, he ran to greet him.

When this boy began his well-rehearsed speech, his father interrupted him by telling the family servants to begin preparing food for a party. He ordered them to bring a robe, shoes and a signet ring for his son to wear, restoring his place of honor and authority in the family.

Through tears of relief and joy, the father made it known the only thing that mattered at that moment was that his son, whom he thought was lost or dead, was alive and had come back home. Now was not the time to sort out all the details. That would come later. This was a time to celebrate his return.

It seems everyone was rejoicing over this boy's homecoming until the older brother came in from the field and heard the music. After discovering the reason for the celebration, he refused to participate, choosing instead to have a pity-party.

So what does the father do? He leaves the homecoming celebration to find his other son. He loves this son unconditionally, too, and wants to help him work through the resentment he feels for his brother.

He shares the good news of his brother's return, defends his decision to welcome him home, justifies the reason for this elaborate party and pleads with the older son to join in the festivities.

Did the angry brother go in and welcome his brother home? We don't know. Jesus didn't say.

It appears he left the ending of this parable open so everyone listening to him that day, especially the Pharisees who struggled with radical grace, could write their own conclusion. I have to believe Jesus wants us to do this, too.

What message did Luke have in mind for his readers when he included this parable in his gospel? I am sure Luke had many lessons on his mind in a parable that had this much dialogue between the main characters.

As I pondered this question last week, my attention was drawn to the striking contrast between the father's response to the Prodigal's return and the brother's. The father welcomed him with open arms while the brother refused to greet him, choosing instead to trash his reputation.

In light of this, I believe one message Luke wanted to highlight is the call to follow Jesus is a call to love those others condemn and shun and to help those who need a fresh start.

This is not easy. Our tendency is to be judgmental and skeptical, maybe even jealous as the older brother was. As followers of Jesus, why should we adopt the attitude of the father in this story and not the brother?

We have been called to make hope visible to those who are living in despair. It makes no difference if they created the hell they are living in by making bad choices and being irresponsible.

When they come to their senses and reach out for help, we must provide them a safe place to fall and a hopeful place to recover.

Early in my ministry I realized pure grace made some people angry. This disturbed me as I watched people being driven back into the far country whose heart was set on coming home. I suppose what bothered me most was that the same people who were the hardest on others who made mistakes didn't seem to have a problem receiving unconditional love when they sinned.

The gospel does not merely call us to trade love with those who live up to their potential and are mature, responsible, kind, respectful, industrious, ambitious and good to us. It also demands that we give love away to those who have done nothing to deserve it.

We don't extend grace to others because of who they are but because of who we are. We are disciples of Jesus who are passionate about healing wounds and repairing relationships.

This is not all we are passionate about, but it is one of our highest priorities. The goal of all who pursue justice and seek peace is to redeem and to restore the fallen and to bring them back into the fold.

Mercy and grace are the bedrock of our faith because we are all sinners. All of us are a combination of the good, the bad and the ugly in need of forgiveness and fresh starts.

None of us needs to pretend our relationships are not messy at times. This is the height of hypocrisy.

We are all capable of making bad choices and hurting those we love the most. Every one of us has been known to sabotage our relationships with our foul language, critical spirit, negative attitude and perhaps abusive behavior.

To ignore our blind spots and spike an attitude when someone comes crawling home for help is unacceptable and inexcusable as followers of Jesus. This is a time to walk alongside someone instead of away from them.

How can you and I do this? This is hard! Yes, it is.

In Marilyn Robinson's novel, Gilead, the characters in John Ames' family come to the realization there are times when it is easier to love the world than their own kin. Perhaps you can identify with their conclusion.

So, how do you love someone with whom you are angry and upset? You have to rise above your feelings and take the high road. Sometimes you have to love people at their worst in order to bring out their best.

No one ever said love was easy, especially not Jesus. Love will demand the deepest and most challenging sacrifices from you and me. It will require that we do the difficult.

When we don't, we are not following Jesus.

The reason the older brother did not welcome the Prodigal home was because he did not love him like his father did. The brother's love was conditional; the father's was not. The brother's attention was on himself; the father's was on his son. The brother's initial reaction was to punish the Prodigal; his father's was to let the Prodigal know he was still of great value and to keep him from returning to the far country.

The elder brother was focused entirely upon the past. The father was focused solely upon the future.

It was time to chart a new course. It was time to begin again. It was time to pick up the broken pieces and reconstruct a better life. It was time to understand what the power of love can do when given a chance. It was time to let a lonely, scared and humiliated boy know his long, hellish nightmare was over.

And what better way to do it than with a welcoming and affirming hug and tears of joy? Can you imagine the relief that boy felt in the arms of his loving father?

Who needs a hug from you today?

A Spanish story says that a father and his son became estranged. The son ran away and the father had no idea where to look for him.

After months passed with no communication, the father put an ad in a Madrid paper that read, "Son, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father."

At the appointed time, over 800 boys showed up hoping the request was from their father.

Who needs you to love them this much? Who needs you to be this kind of parent, family member or friend?

On the other hand, who needs you to come to your senses? Who needs you to own up to your decisions and quit blaming others for where you are? Who needs you to be honest, humble and repentant? Who is ready to welcome you home this morning?

Don't let pride keep you where you are if where you are is not where you need to be. Ask God to help you take that first step in the right direction. I assure you God will be by your side before you take the second one.