

IT'S SAFE TO COME HOME AGAIN

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March 27, 2022

Text: Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

For nearly five years before the pandemic, I made a monthly visit to a residential treatment center in Saint Paul that treats LGBT people recovering from addiction. Most of the residents there are under 30 years old and were there undergoing court-mandated treatment after being arrested for crimes associated with alcohol and drug use. Others had lost everything and finally came to themselves and sought out treatment.

Every month, I saw new people in treatment, which required me to re-introduce myself as a clergy person who was there for a conversation with them about faith, spirituality, hopes, dreams, and meaning. Interestingly, while they are people often thought to be lost, they knew where home and church were and how to get there. But I was almost always met with very pointed questions and critiques about how unhelpful church and religion had been to them. I was, for many, the embodiment of church abuse, family rejection, and punitive judgment. And even when I was able to gain enough of their trust to have a conversation, the one unmistakable message I received from them about the church and even some of their homes was that it was not safe to go home. The message of church and family about the nature of God was that God was angry and determined to punish. God was not safe for them.

As much I have tried to, I cannot stop seeing in the experience of those residents in recovery the experience of the lost son in this parable. And it breaks my heart to realize that they've only encountered the judgment and resentment expressed by the older brother when they attempted to return. And how many of those respondents checking "none of the above" in those religious identities and church attendance surveys have been met with the grumbling judgments of older siblings in the faith rather than the celebratory embrace of a gracious and compassionate parent? While many of the details of this familiar, famous parable could be mined for a range of messages, I think this parable wants to tell us something about the character of God, the reliability and longevity of covenant love and loyalty, and the grace and compassion that await us when we remember who and whose we are and seek to overcome our alienation.

It is often unremarked upon that while this parable is third in a series of stories about being lost, the younger son is the only lost character who knows his way home and for whom no one is looking. He is lost because his family does not know where he is. For a person estranged and alienated from a place that he knows and presumed to be lost forever, the only question is if and how he would be received upon returning. Is it safe to go home again? We never do learn why the younger son asks for his inheritance. We don't know why he would leave his home, cutting himself off from his family and community. We do not know why the father decided to do what can be translated as "divide his life" between his two sons. But the estrangement is complete, and the younger son leaves everything he knows behind, indulges in decadent vices, and squanders his inheritance.

At his lowest, he comes to himself. Could dissolute living prevent him from going home? Having rejected his family and home, he knew what would be said about him. He likely said it about himself: Loser. Failure. Scoundrel. Reckless. Foolish. Profligate. Stupid. So, when he came to himself, remembering who he is and

where he comes from, hungry and wracked with shame and self-pity, he thinks about how to return in a way that would make it safe. He prepares to accept the status of one who still doesn't have a home, even if it means working as a hired hand.

It's not often pointed out that both sons expected the same thing from the father: judgment, punishment, and rejection. Neither could imagine any other response to missing the mark or losing one's way. They could not make room in their imagination for a response that does not demand the steepest price for any transgression. The conventions of culture, economics, respectability, and honor and shame are often indifferent or hostile to shows of grace and compassion. That's why the son who stayed could be so unmoved by the return of a son and brother thought dead and so unwilling to celebrate the reunion of a family broken and incomplete without its youngest member.

That's also why I think we reserve our harshest judgment for the older son. Because a part of us truly believes he is right in both his judgment and resentment. In our own culture, we worry greatly about what can be perceived as rewarding bad behavior. We demand some show of, if not repentance, at least taking the consequences of our mistakes and learning our lesson. And our theories of justice depend on punishing people for their crimes. The father's response confounds all of these expectations. We are uncomfortable when grace and compassion seem to abolish justice.

If the father's behavior is scandalous or confounding, perhaps it's because we underestimate just how radical grace and compassion can be. When the father saw his lost son, he was filled with compassion. Think about that for a moment. Yes, the father was relieved to see a son he thought was dead and lost. But he was also filled with compassion. This father, like God, was aware that his son was in distress and desired only to relieve and comfort him. Even when the son gets the chance between his father's hugs and kisses to spit out his confession of sin, the father doesn't even acknowledge it, focusing instead on showering his son with gifts and planning a grand celebration. It was safe to come home.

So Jesus tells a parable to tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes, outsiders and insiders, about a parent who welcomes both the son alienated from home and community and the son who had been faithful all along. How could a parent do otherwise? How could a gracious and compassionate God do otherwise? No one should be sacrificed to maintain the social, economic, and cultural systems and structures. Grace and compassion cease to be if the goal is to uphold human traditions and institutions. It is why the Apostle Paul could declare to the church in Corinth that in Christ, "we regard no one from a human point of view" (2 Cor. 5:16).

That's why those young people in treatment found it unsafe to go home or to the church. They have not known the grace and compassion that God offers us all God's children. Perhaps, that's why the church has become the least reliable option for safe harbor for people seeking to return home. They have all too often been regarded solely from a human point of view: Losers. Failures. Scoundrels. Reckless. Foolish. Profligate. Stupid. We have no problem seeing those estranged from God and our community of faith as children of God. But are we willing to throw open our arms and doors with grace and compassion and celebrate them no matter what they have done or how dissolute their pasts have been?

Lent is the season of coming to ourselves, remembering who and whose we are, and making our way back to God. The good news is that it is always safe to go home to God. No matter how we have distorted the gospel, retreated from beloved community, or failed to love and serve our neighbor, God can be trusted to see us making our way back and to run out to greet us. God is aware of our distress and seeks only to relieve and comfort us with God's embrace. The Psalmist knew it when they sang that the Lord surrounds us with glad cries of deliverance, recognizing us and rejoicing in our being brought back into relationship.

But we as the church are called to remember that we are the face and representative of a gracious and compassionate God, and we are called to tend to our posture for those looking for a safe return. It may

mean that we resist the temptation to exact a price or punishment for those who have gone astray in some way and assume a posture of reconciliation, of offering an opportunity to be included, of embracing those who were once thought to be dead and lost. We know it's safe to come home to God. Now, let us demonstrate it with our compassion for God's beloved when they come to themselves and make their way here. What a celebration that will be. Amen.