

4 Lent March 27, 2022
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Home, in the Best Sense of the Word
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It might be said one of the deepest desires in every human heart is the longing for what we call *home* in the best sense of the word. There are hundreds of songs, stories, books, poems, sports, and movies about going home, missing home, hitting home runs, the country roads that take us home, the people that make a place a home, and how there is no place like it. In all of these, home is a concept that is part memory, part nostalgia, part idealism, part belonging, part peace, part joy.

In our best imagining of home, it is where we are welcome, understood, where we make room for each other, where there is forgiveness. It's a place that lets us breathe in all that is good, and we can rest. Home, in the theological sense, is not so much a memory or a location, home is being reconciled or restored to the love that made us all. Home is about relationship with God and each other, as all three readings we heard point to today. Especially the parable Jesus told to address the complaining religious people in today's Gospel.

Often called the parable of the prodigal son, it is perhaps one of the best-known stories Jesus' told. It has been depicted in art by famous artists. Hundreds of pages of commentary have been written about it. There was even a TV series about a father and son with a very complicated relationship called *Prodigal Son*.

Most of the time, when we listen to or read this long parable, we usually focus on the children, especially the younger son and occasionally the elder son. Sometimes we might look at the extraordinary behavior of the father as evidence that Jesus is telling us we know so very little about God who loves us more than our selfish behaviors.

These are all very well and good lenses through which to view this parable. And parables are stories with many layers to them, giving us much to contemplate about ourselves and God. These lenses have their purpose, but when we focus only on one character, we might fail to notice some of the more subtle details that tie the characters together: the journey away from home, the longing for home, the return home, and the truth that sometimes the person who has lived and worked hard in the same place their whole life doesn't necessarily feel at home. If we step back from focusing on the individual characters in this parable and refrain from trying to guess which one we are, we might see Jesus is addressing our deep spiritual longing, which might explain the popular appeal of

this parable over the centuries. So, let's take a break from picking on one of the characters today, and let the story speak in its wholeness. It might help us see how Jesus is trying to tell us a story about how God's longing and ours are one in the same: for home, in the very best sense of the word.

It could be argued this parable of a family sums up the story arch in all the books of the Bible. The story that begins in Genesis with humanity living in paradise. What made it paradise wasn't the tropical weather, it was being in a trusting relationship with God and each other. Humans didn't need things like clothing or housing, farming or grocery stores because they loved and cared for each other. This trust was broken when people decided to use the gift of free will to judge for ourselves what is right or wrong, what is good and what is not good, instead of relying on God.

In breaking that trust we gained something but lost something else. We gained the opportunity to judge for ourselves. At the same time, we lost caring for God and each other. We lost home. Off humans went into the wide world where adventure awaited us. There are many adventures in the Bible. Whenever there were struggles, people would remember their home, that garden where God and humans walked together in the cool of the evening, where there was love and respect, and they would pray for God to remember them and help them, much like the younger son in the parable. Sometimes, like with the elder son in the parable, God would reach out to people, trying to remind them God longs for that relationship we once had to be restored, and God is willing to do whatever it takes to reconcile us back to God's self, even to the point of sharing our human life, dying on a cross, and rising to new life.

In the parable, Jesus uses the sons as characters that represent the break of trust and sense of loss. It is perhaps easier to recognize this in the behavior of the younger son, who wanted his share of inheritance before it was time and went off to do whatever he wanted without any care for anyone but himself. The elder brother may have stayed home, but we see his relationship with his father and his brother is far from loving and respectful. There is no joy in the elder son when his brother returned. He didn't even use the word brother. He never thought about his father's feelings but had no problem expressing his own feelings of jealousy, anger, and resentment. For the elder son, it seems, home was not a place where he felt love, even when personally invited.

Perhaps because it seems he wanted home to be all about him instead of making room for all the people who make any place home. This can make the elder brother seem the more relatable character for many who struggle or who do not have a healthy home environment. One of the things that became clear for too many couples and families during the pandemic was they don't like being at

home. Often because home is not a place of love, but of rejection or abuse or failure to meet expectations no one can. Other times it was just getting on each other's nerves, which is part of family life. But the realization that some relationships were too toxic to last was one of the many reasons the pandemic is painful in more ways than the inconvenience of caring for each other by wearing face masks in public.

Other families and couples grew closer during the pandemic because they were able to adapt to changes and through mutual love and respect got through those times of getting on each other's nerves by caring for each other. Of course, those who live alone faced their own challenges. But whether or not you experienced loneliness or growth during the pandemic, the parable of Jesus shows how important the concept of home, of a place you can go back to or belong is.

In the moment of homecoming, of having his family under one roof again, the father forgave and welcomed his younger son and threw a party to celebrate with the best food and music and dancing. This party is for everyone, but of course the elder brother couldn't find the joy, even when invited. It is perhaps a heartbreaking moment in the parable to see how deeply the father desires his family to be reconciled to him, but the elder brother, while appearing to be faithful, really wants a separate party of his own. And we all know, separate is not equal. The elder son does not want to be in a family that welcomes and forgives, and this rejection hurts both sons and the father, and shows something about reconciliation.

Being reconciled to God means letting God decide who God is going to welcome and forgive. It means letting God be the judge. It means surrendering to the love that is Christ. This does not mean staying in relationships that are harmful, abusive, and toxic. Reconciliation can happen with healthy boundaries and behaviors. Reconciliation starts with turning to God.

Remember today's Gospel began not with the parable, but with the complaints of the religiously righteous who were so focused on the negative, on the harmful behavior of the people turning to God through Jesus' presence and teaching they could not see the beauty in what was happening. There was reason to celebrate, and they didn't want to join the party. Apparently because they were expecting a reward for their behavior that somehow also involved excluding the people they wanted left out. God's kingdom of heaven doesn't work that way. God's kingdom, the home God wants for us all, involves healing those divides and harms between us, however they were formed.

Someone once said to me the hospital is where you get fixed, home is where you heal. This wisdom can apply to this parable that reminds us home is where all who turn to God are welcome to be reconciled to God and each other so that we can create as best we can little bits of home in the best sense of the word wherever we are.

It starts when we confess our sins every Sunday in the worship service. This confession is both communal – confessing the sins of this parish and the church – and individual – confessing our personal sins. Confession is also turning to God, admitting not only what we have done, but the longing within us for the home of God's kingdom and letting God begin the work of healing in us. Healing the tears in the fabric in our being caused by selfishness and greed, anger, jealousy, hate, pride, or regret. Healing that works by letting God love us.

Perhaps the most beautiful part of the parable is the father who sees not the selfish cruelty of his sons, nor the worst things they have done, but people he loves and cares for with all he is and all he has, and that love is what makes home for us all, in the very best sense of the word.