

# "Welcome Home!"

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North Andover, MA

**Homecoming Sunday**

**September 12, 2010**

**Luke 15:1-2, 11-24**

On this Homecoming Sunday I thought we'd take a look at one of the most beautiful homecomings ever described. Our passage today records arguably the most famous short story in all the world - the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It has to do with a "homecoming," doesn't it? To see the context of the parable we have to look at the first two verses of Luke 15.

**Luke 15:1-2:**

*"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"*

Jesus is being criticized for being too friendly with non-religious people - "He welcomes sinners and even shares meals with them." So Jesus tries to teach the religious leaders of his day something about the Amazing Grace of God. And he does so with a story.

## **Luke 15:11-24**

*Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

I've been thinking a lot about Homecomings lately. You know, they come in all shapes and sizes. For example just think about the difference between

the homecoming you get from a dog vs the homecoming you get from a cat. The dog will jump up and down, lick your face, wag his tail and be so excited he can hardly contain himself. A cat on the other hand will usually give you a cold shoulder - "Oh, it's you. Well, I was just going into the other room." Two very different kinds of homecomings.

Soldiers returning from W.W.II got ticker-tape parades. Soldiers returning from Vietnam sometimes got spat upon.

I have friends who are "Pease Greeters." Whenever there are troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and they're to land at the Pease international Airport, outside of Portsmouth, NH, my friends go to meet them, joining with dozens of other Pease Greeters. When the soldiers come through the terminal they receive quite a surprise. Folks gather on both sides of them, applauding wildly, while the soldiers walk through to a reception thrown just for them. My friends will get up in the middle of the night to meet a plane of soldiers at 4 am, because they feel its important to give them a wonderful homecoming.

So there's a broad spectrum of Homecomings - from yellow ribbons and open arms to a cold shoulder and the locks are changed - they come in all shapes and sizes.

Today's passage describes a homecoming that is simply divine. It's a story that most people are familiar with, so I thought we'd just focus on

the Father's Welcome, the Homecoming that the Father provides for the Prodigal Son, the son who took his inheritance and wasted it all away, and then finally headed for home.

**First the Father calls for his servants to go find the best Robe in the house and then put it on my son.** In the First Century this was done to honor one guest. Today if you went into someone's house and they immediately draped you in their bathrobe, you'd think it was rather strange. "No, really, I'm fine." But back then it meant - "I am honored, humbled, proud and delighted to have you in my home." This told the Prodigal Son right away that his Father was not going to shame him. It was a clear sign that not only was his father going to forgive him, he already had forgiven him! Imagine the relief the son must have felt. It says a lot about the goodness of the Father's heart.

President Lincoln was once asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners once the Civil War was over. Would he be vindictive or vengeful against them. Lincoln replied, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." That's the treatment that the Prodigal Son received.

**B. Next the Father says, "Get me a ring. Put a ring on my son's finger.** He's home now. Get a ring." This would not have been just any ring. It would have been the family ring. Having a unique, special family ring was common among royalty and the wealthy. - Signet ring with a special seal. It was a ring of authority. It said to all those on the farm - "The

one wearing this ring is in charge. He's part of the inner circle. I must listen to him."

Now think about what the Father is saying with this act. It's quite an act of grace and trust, isn't it? The Prodigal Son is willing to be taken back as a servant. Remember the speech he practiced? - "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your servants." But the father quickly tells him through the ring - "I take you back wholly and completely. Take this ring of authority. You're one of the ones in charge around here." The Father put a lot of trust in his wayward son, didn't he?

You know, of course, that the Father in the story represents God. And just like the Father in the story God has entrusted us with a lot as well. God has handed over a lot of God's authority.

1 - God has entrusted to us to care for Creation. We're stewards of the earth.

2 - God has entrusted us to care for the poor. That's at the heart of being a Christian and of loving God, caring for "the least of these," as Jesus put it.

This is entitled, "Why?"

"On the street I saw a small girl, cold and shivering in a thin dress,

with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God: "Why did you permit this? Why don't you do something about it? For awhile God said nothing. That night God replied quite suddenly: "I certainly did something about it. I made you." God has entrusted us with caring for the poor.

3 - God has also entrusted us with the Gospel.

Matthew 28 - *"Go forth into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all I have commanded you."*

God has left us in charge of sharing the Good News of God and of making, shaping and forming disciples - Christ-followers. This is why Sunday School, youth groups, mission trips, Bible studies and caregiving are so important. They're all about forming disciples of Christ.

There's an apocryphal story about when Jesus returned to heaven following his mission on earth. The angels gather around him to hear a report. Jesus tells them about being born in Bethlehem, about teaching people about the Kingdom, about his miracles, his atoning death and victorious resurrection. Gabriel then asks, "What will happen now?" Jesus says, "I've left the work in the hands of a small band of disciples, fishermen mostly. They will share the message and carry on my work." Gabriel then asks - "What if that doesn't work? What will be the plan then?" Jesus says, "There is no other plan"

The work of the church is very important work. It's no less than carrying on the ministry of Jesus Christ. God has given us each a ring of authority and entrusted us Prodigals with a very sacred task - to carry on the work, the ministry of Jesus and his love.

So, the Prodigal Son gets a beautiful robe of honor. He gets a ring of authority.

**C. Next he gets Shoes/Scandals.** This is the clearest sign that he is being taken back as a son and not a servant. The servants, called slaves here, did not have shoes. That's why the old African-American spiritual said: *"All of God chillun got shoes. When I get to heaven I'm going to put on my shoes. I'm going to walk all over God's heaven."*

You know there's a big difference between being a servant versus being a son. Think about it this way - would you rather be a servant of Bill Gates, or a son or daughter of Bill Gates? Sons and daughters get to enjoy all the blessings of the parents. So, too, in God's family.

Let's keep going. The Robe of Honor, the Ring of Authority, the Shoes of Sonship, and then,

**D. And then, a Great Big Party!** "Kill the fatted calf!" - that of course was an animal kept and fattened up for a very special occasion; and this was just such an occasion. This is a profound moment of grace not just

for the son but also for the father who has regained his son - his son was dead and now has come to life; he once was lost but now is found. This calls for a great party. We read later in the story that it was not only a great feast but also a great party with "music and dancing."

Did you ever think about the fact that our faith, our worship, our love bring God great joy? - that when we open up to God it produces a Party in God's heart. There's a song we sing called, "I Love You, Lord." It says, "Take joy, my King, in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear." The Father through a party when his Son came home. When we come home to God it brings God great joy.

I love that idea of faith as coming home to God. Augustine said, "My soul finds no rest, O God, until it finds itself in Thee."

Faith is coming home to God.

Prayer is coming home to God.

Worship is coming home to God.

Communion is coming home to God.

(The final part of this sermon was delivered at the Communion Table)

Years ago I was driving home from seminary and I got lost somewhere in central New Jersey. It was late at night and it was one of those areas



where everything looked the same - every intersection, every house, every store. I had no idea where I was. So I finally stopped and went into a convenience store that was still open. I went up to the guy at the counter and said, "Please help me. I am totally, completely lost." He looked at me and said, "You're not lost. You're here!!"

To lead us into Communion there's one more part of the Prodigal Son's Homecoming that I want to mention - and that's the Embrace and the Kiss. The Father ran to his. He embraced him. And then he he kissed him.

Martin Luther was said that Communion is the kiss of Christ"

Let it be that for you this morning.

Let God love you this morning.

Welcome Home.