

## *“Heading Home”*

*Psalm 145; Luke 15:11-24*

July 19, 2020

Likely since the very beginning of oral communication, humankind has told stories to one another. It just seems natural to us to gather and hear others tell us tales or to pick up a book and read an entertaining yarn. Written stories known to us today go back as far as the epic of Gilgamesh. That tale was recorded somewhere around 2700 BC. Great stories and storytelling continue right to this very day. Consider this - you can't hardly look at a newsfeed and not hear about what's going on "Game of Thrones," which, although known to most of us in video-form, is nothing more than a series of novels played out in front of our eyes.

And while stories are entertaining things, make no mistake about it, they can also be powerful. Stories can teach us. The best of them can help us see things about ourselves that psychologists and counselors never could.

Interestingly, businesses have begun to capitalize on the power of narrative to convey ideas and meaning. In fact, tech companies, often the leading edge of things, are now commonly hiring Chief Storytelling Officers. These are people who narrate the rise of their companies and attach those stories to their company's vision. But while the market seems to be onto something new, the fact of the matter is what they're employing goes back thousands of generations.

That there are truths too deep for flowcharts or propositional logic, certainly wasn't news to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. On many occasions Jesus sat with people and told them stories. Only we don't call them stories, we call them parables. And in each one of them, Jesus manages to make his meaning rather clear.

Isn't it interesting to note that we remember these stories far more easily than, let's say, the material in Paul's letters? That's because, when we hear a story, a good one, we naturally imagine ourselves in it. Stories have the power to help us understand ourselves better as we relate to them. In fact, the greatest stories can even change us.

This morning, I read to you the parable of the Prodigal Son. I'm only going to read half of it, really. The other part I'll save for another sermon. But now, I ask you to hear this story, finding yourself not just listening to it, but locating yourself within it.

<sup>11</sup> And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to<sup>[b]</sup> one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants,<sup>[d]</sup> 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

## “You Can’t Go Home Again”

That’s the novel North Carolinian Thomas Wolfe wrote in the months preceding his death. He didn’t know he was dying, mind you. Maybe if he did, he would’ve done a few things differently.

The book itself was only published after his passing, as was Wolfe’s return home. His body’s return to Asheville was the last and only time he’d been back in the mountains of North Carolina after leaving the state to follow the muse of his literary genius to New York City. So, as he wrote this novel, “You Can’t Go Home Again” Thomas Wolfe was writing from his own life’s experience.

In the novel, we encounter budding young novelist George Webber. His greatest literary success comes as he writes a book reflecting on his own hometown, Libya Hill. The novel, is a huge success all over the country with one single exception - Libya Hill. Turns out the people of there don’t particularly like the way young George has remembered them. So, George, in his success gets to see adoring fans all across the country yet in his heart, he yearns simply to come home.

And I wonder, as anyone wonders when reading that novel, if Thomas Wolfe wasn’t writing out of the pain lodged in his own heart in having left Asheville, never to look back. So, it must’ve been a wistful longing that surrounded Wolfe’s heart as he sat and penned that novel.

We’ve all, every one of us here, encountered that longing for days gone by, when things appeared far rosier than they do at present. I mean, who here wouldn’t want to go back to those wonderful days of childhood when the concerns of the world and the pressures of adulthood didn’t ache within our hearts. A time when things were simpler, less frightening and uncertain.

But perhaps more than even a return to childhood, is there anyone here who wouldn’t want to go back and change some mistake they’d made in the past? Perhaps we’d take back those poisonous words we uttered, changing a relationship forever. Maybe you’d go back and be kinder to that person that would later-on become your boss. The means and ways in which we’ve erred are as different as the snowflakes which fall from the sky but we’ve all done things which we deeply regret.

It’s my own experiences with regret that make this story so powerful for me. I tell you, the part of the story that gets me every single time. When the prodigal’s money is all gone and he’s forced into doing manual labor. There, feeling the sweat upon his brow and the acrid stench of pigs filling his nostrils comes that moment. You know the kind of moment I’m talking about. *The very moment when we realize what everyone around us has likely known all along – that we’ve made bad choices and are presently living with their repercussions.*

To say this younger son has made bad choices is known to us at the onset of hearing the story, isn’t it? After all, we wonder, what kind of child goes to his father, a father that’s proving for him and says, essentially, “I don’t care about you, give me the money I’ll get when you’re dead.” That’s the force of what the son states when he tells his father to pay him his inheritance right now.

We think this shocking, really. The ingratitude, the cluelessness. But if we’ll examine our own lives just a bit closer, we may find more in common with this younger son than we’d care to realize. In essence, this younger brother reached a time in his life where he wanted the good stuff his Father had, but didn’t really want a relationship with him at all.

We do that too, you know. After all, haven’t we all, at times, used various words to give lip service to our Father God?

Haven’t we all said in our hearts, give me the good parts of the Christian life, the resurrection, the friends, perhaps we even just want a sense of righteousness. Give all of that to me, without really wanting to carry a Cross? Let me just have a good Sunday morning worship experience and that’s all I really want out of this whole Christianity-thing.

Don’t we want the good without really wanting to know the Word and be guided utterly and completely by it. Don’t we all want to be Christian without feeling it’s calls to sacrifice, service and

evangelism? We want resurrection, shun suffering. We desire new life but want desperately to hold on to old ways.

We, like this younger son, want the best of what our Father offers us in and through Jesus Christ with none of the work, the learning, the dedication, the suffering that a life in Jesus Christ contains. We don't want a relationship at all.

And while we don't know what motivates the Younger Son to want to depart from his Father's House, we know what leads us to deviate from God's desires for our lives. We hear the subtle and not-so-subtle summoning of a world broken by sin. We see the bright lights and the good times seeming to be had by those who have no God and deep down inside, we want the thrills and the chills more far than we want a life of humble dedication to the Lord. In short, more often than not, what we want from God is for him to be some sort of kindly grandfather that gives us what we want without asking anything from us.

So, we depart, maybe we even choose to leave the church. Shedding it's Sunday services, it's calls to action and to care for others more than ourselves. Or maybe, just maybe, we keep coming to worship on Sunday but we come thinking more about the past week or the football games later that afternoon than we ever dare listen to the Pastor's sermon. We come but we don't contribute. We listen but when it conflicts with our politics or our affluence, we tune out. When the call comes, asking us to serve in leadership, we have a rolodex filled with ready-made excuses.

Whether we physically leave or not, we stand in close proximity with this younger son who boldly determines that he wants nothing more than the goods of his father while at the same time rejecting his Fatherhood. Because as anyone who has ever been a parent realizes, there is more to the job than just the trips to Disney World. There are the trips to the doctor's, complete with shots and the hard-to-hear "NOs" that elicit such hysteria oftentimes required to keep kids safe.

The Younger Son, as we know, sets about on a course of what the Scriptures call "dissolute living." Freed from his Father's watchful eye, he engages in everything his heart desires. All the things his Father warned him about. He indulges in a reckless pursuit of pleasure without concerns beyond his own enjoyment of life.

"Dissolute living," I wonder what he himself would've called it. There, as it sat mired in filth, feeding pigs food he desperately wanted to put to his own lips, I wonder what he would've called it. What do you think the prodigal son would've pointed to as bringing about all his misfortune?

Dissolute living is so intangible. Sin, on a cosmic scale is equally intangible. The best theologians and Biblical scholars can talk about it in such sweeping terms that soon its very contours are blurry in our eyes.

Our own sins, are not. They're not cosmic and sweeping. They're ordinary and every day.

Throughout the centuries, the church of Jesus Christ has categorized seven that it lists as being *deadly*. **Pride, Lust, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy and Greed.** These things.

The Seven Deadly, as they're known, are the actions and behaviors each and every one of us engage in. Sure, looking with rose colored glasses we could all reflect on our lives and see nothing but righteousness. The fact of the matter is that these 7 deadly sins walk with us in our daily lives like an unwelcome shadow.

And so we read the story of the prodigal son and his plight and I think we all know what got him there smelling pigs and feeling remorse. Perhaps it was wine coupled with proclivity for good times and poor company that led him to the edge of poverty – to the brink of sadness *all dwelling in foreign lands, away from his Father's house.*

The suffering that comes as the result of sin, it isn't as though the Bible doesn't speak on it. Not only do we have countless examples of this knowledge being shared on page after page of our Scriptures, so too do we have the stories therein which serve to illustrate its truthfulness.

Everyone knows about Noah's great success in trusting God and building the ark, but do we also remember that just about as soon as the mud on his feet began to dry, he went and got needlessly drunk, in so doing, shattering his family? Who doesn't remember the great triumph of David as he hurls his stone, slaying the great Goliath? But may we never forget his taking of Uriah's wife Bathsheba and the terrible things which followed. Perhaps most chillingly of all, remember Ananias and Sapphira? If you don't know, look it up, it's in Acts of the Apostles.

When we sin, we endure consequences. Whether it's just a sleepless night or two or if it's years spent in prison doesn't really matter. Sin comes with measure of God's wrath. Paul tells us that so clearly in Romans 1. There, he writes – "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."

And it only makes sense. For God has no part in sin and so we engage in it, we set out for a foreign country just like this younger son. We chose to abandon a Holy God to set out for Unholy places or actions.

And then comes that moment of clarity I was speaking about earlier. For the chosen, this moment of sudden awareness in which we know deep within our hearts that we've strayed is as certain as 90+ temperatures during summers in North Carolina. That moment we realize that the pain and suffering we're enduring doesn't really have its origin in any other place than in our sin. In our bad behavior. As awful as those times are, they really are small blessings from God. For we simply do not change that which we do not regret.

I remember one of those moments from my own life as though it were yesterday although it's been more years than I'd care to admit. I was crazy about a girl. Oh, how many great tales of woe begin with that line, right? Well, I liked her and I wanted to date her, so I told her some things that weren't really true. The fact of the matter is that I lied to her hoping she'd like me more. One of those lies happened to be that I could speak Russian fluently.

Then, one day, in a very public place, we ran into a dear friend of hers who was from Russia. Of course, here I was, supposed to know a lot of it and the man says to me, essentially "Hello, how are you doing?" Well, I couldn't answer. It didn't take long for her to realize I'd been dishonest. We didn't go on another date after that, in fact, she never once returned another of my phone calls.

I suffered for my sin there and all the too numerous times I've chosen, like this younger son, to stray from the safety of my Father's instructions.

And like I said earlier, we've all had those moments when we realized that the only one to blame for our present misfortune is ourselves. It's a lonely, terrible feeling. It's one in which we see our own failures so perfectly and completely that we simply cannot understand why anyone in the world would want to call us friend, let alone beloved child. We stand, in our misery and our self-loathing, isolated and alone.

We don't think we could ever again return to our Father's home, not as a beloved child at least. Not in the way we once were.

And it's in that misery that the Younger Son hatches a plan. A plan just like this younger son, or you or I would hatch. He's going to confess his failure, but only in order to manipulate his father into doing what he wants. It's like when you tell your spouse you're sorry but you're only doing so to get out of hot water with no real change of heart or intention.

It's a kind of repentance to get our own ends met that occurs all the time. It's like seed planted on rocky soil, it springs up fast but never really takes root. It's that momentary change that suits the situation but never leads to new life.

The first "adult" movie I ever saw and understood as an adult was a film called Grand Canyon. In it, Steve Martin plays an odious movie director. He makes the worst kind of films, violent and vacuous. But then, one day, he gets carjacked and shot. He's hovering between life and death. It's

there where he supposedly has a change of heart. He tells his friends he's going to stop making those terrible movies, that he's seen the light.

Ah, but as the movie progresses, you realize he hasn't really changed. He's still making those movies, still just as Hollywood obnoxious as they come. You sense that his desire to good was situational, arising from fear of death.

I think that's what the younger son is doing here. He's willing to confess to his father but he's also going to subtly attach it to getting his own way. Like, "See me God, I'm sorry, give me that promotion now that I understand where I've gone wrong."

But, in reality, we may come home that way because we simply can't imagine we can return home, a child, fully embraced, ever again. We can't imagine a Father who will simply not hold the past against us. We think the best we can get from our Father now is to be treated like a servant. We've simply done too much wrong. Though back at home, we'll never really be "at home" ever again.

Thomas Wolfe was a great author, but he wasn't a theologian. The Christian life is foundationally built upon Jesus Christ, the one who seeks the lost sheep, the one who tells us that there's more joy in heaven than when a sinner repents than anything else in all of creation. That Father tells us, we can ALWAYS go home again. Jesus Christ is the one who died so that we can ALWAYS return back into our Father's warmest embrace.

. You can always, every day, every moment, return back from whatever seems to hold you trapped in sadness and anxiety back into God's outstretched arms.

No matter what you can feel the finest garments drape over your body, you can taste the fatted calf yet again. You can dance once again in the full sunlight of the Holy Spirit. The essence of the Gospel is that you can return to your heavenly father's house no matter what you've done and expect to find jubilation NOT judgment. Rejoicing not rebuke. Dancing Not damnation.

The God of Scripture tells us frequently and often that we're his beloved. His adoration for us is so lavish, so unjustified that perhaps the truly prodigal character isn't so much the younger son as it is the father, the God who races back to us as we stride homeward with our shoulders slumped over, the look of abject defeat cast in our eyes. Prodigality is defined as being characterized as profuse expenditure. Sure, the younger son did that, but the character in our parable that really exemplifies prodigality isn't him, it's the Father.

The younger son was profuse in his wasteful spending of his inheritance but it ran out. It turned out to be in shorter supply than he'd imagined. The father, however, holds greater reserves. The father, our father, has an abundant love that runs over and over and over whatever limits we imagine for him. His love is extravagant. Abundant. Never ceasing.

We can go home again, fully, completely, not as servants but as beloved children.

I want to close with a familiar story I ran across the other day. It was a tale that I'd heard at least twice before. It's an old pastor's story. If you've heard it before, bear with me, I still think it's worth listening to.

The story goes like this. Imagine a train steaming through hilly terrain. On board sits a Methodist pastor, looking forward to meeting his new congregation. This was in the days before air or automotive travel. Times when those itinerant Methodist pastors would only see their new church for the first time on the day they moved into the parsonage beside it.

So there, on that train sat that Methodist pastor, himself more than a little anxious about the next few weeks of his life.

Have you ever noticed when you're struggling with a particular emotion, how much more cognizant of it in other people?

Well, this pastor looks up from the Bible he'd been reading as the hours slipped by on board the train and sees a younger man, wringing his hands, staring intently out the train's window.

Something makes that Methodist pastor ask the young man, "son, are you all right?"

"Well" he says "A few years ago I left home. It wasn't the nicest of departures. I told my mom and my dad that I never wanted to see them again. To tell you the truth, pastor," he says, "I don't really remember what started the fight between my dad and me.

But when it happened, I was old enough to know I just didn't want to live in his house any longer. So, I said some terrible things to my dad. And then I left. Up and walked out of that house. I left behind a note saying that, come hell or high water, I'd never ever come back home."

"But then, a few months ago I got so homesick that I just couldn't stand it any longer. I think the feeling had been there all along but I'd just ignored it.

So, I wrote a note, to my Mom of course. I just knew that my dad would tear up any correspondence from me. In that note I told my mom that I'd be taking a train trip through this neck of the woods on this very day. You see, my parent's house sits upon a hill. You can see these tracks very from the house and, when it's clear, people on the train can see it."

"So, I told my mom in that letter, if there's even the slightest chance that dad will let me step foot into his house again, hang a white sheet from the clothes drying line. If I see it, I'll know that I might be able to come home and talk with dad again. If I don't, well then, I'll just continue on my journey without stopping." He said those words and you could just see the sadness hang upon his face at the prospect of NOT seeing that sheet.

"So, I'm nervous" the man confessed to the pastor. "I know that house is coming up soon. I've never wanted to see a simple white sheet in my life more than I do right now. Heck, I've never wanted to see anything more than I want to see that darned sheet."

Now that Methodist pastor, doing what all pastors have the tendency to do, hedged a bit saying "God's will be done."

But now, it wasn't just the young man looking out the window. The Pastor wanted to see how it all played out. So soon, he's moved to the other side of the train. Soon, not only the young man but that Methodist pastor was staring out the window of the train intently, wringing their hands.

And then, as the train rounded a curve the most amazing sight sprang into their eyes. There, upon that hill, well, there wasn't JUST a single white sheet hanging on a drying line. Rather the entire hill was covered with white sheets. The hill was as white as if a blanket of snow had fallen on that hill in the middle of summer, awash in white sheets.

The Methodist pastor, in recounting that story, said he'd never seen anyone move as fast as that young man did when they reached the station. There seemed to be nothing but air under his feet as he ran back home.

Friends, believe the Good News of the Gospel over against anything that tells you otherwise. Friends, by the grace of God, you can always go Home Again.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen