

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 31, 2019
The Very Rev. Denise Trogdon

Returning Home—the Prodigal Son

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

I have heard it said that once you leave home you can never go back. Apparently, my adult children didn't get the memo! I believe this adage is partly true. You can never go back home without things being different. The act of separating out often triggers clarity as to what issues we own and what may be family dynamics. But even when we re-enter the system wiser and more mature, it doesn't take long to fall back into familiar patterns. Only now we can see them, and they feel less tolerable. So, returning home is possible, but it isn't easy. A little grace is a welcome ingredient.

In our gospel today we hear the parable of the prodigal son. This story though familiar, has a way of stirring us up. Your perspective probably has something to do with where you are in your own life. Ready to be on your own, you may relate to the restlessness of the younger son. If you are a parent of someone who has become estranged, you understand all too well the longing of that forlorn father. Maybe you feel the older brother's angst at what seems unfair and dismissive of his faithfulness. Extravagant grace even without repentance, manipulative behavior unchecked, resentment and hostility unresolved, Jesus uses this messy family to teach us about kingdom values.

Jesus told this story in response to the grumblings of the Jewish elite, who accused him of welcoming sinners. Guilty by association they attempted to discredit Jesus. But Jesus spoke of a grace that challenged human reason and defied cultural conventions. An agrarian society, the land and its ownership was their livelihood, their standing in the community, their honor. In a patriarchal system, children did not demand their inheritance. Reconciliation was counter-cultural to those whose laws demanded justice, in the face of wrongdoing. The restoration of relationship came at great cost, to the father's honor, and to the brother's trust. Despite a broken heart, unmerited grace was offered freely.

Isn't this our story with God? We break God's heart every day and even when we begrudgingly come back, God runs to us with open arms and welcomes us home. But I don't believe that Jesus tells this tale to remind us of God's extravagant love. He challenges those grumbling Pharisees who stand in resentment, having been faithful Jews to their God of justice. He points to their entitlement and righteous judgment. This is a place of alienation, a place that many committed Christians visit. Do we stand outside the banquet fuming because we have followed the rules? Do we distance from God when we think life is unfair? Jesus asks us to consider if we would embrace him even if he came in the form of one who reeks of unwashed sin.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian whose wartime experiences brought him face to face with issues of reconciliation, offers us some wisdom. In his book, *Free of Charge—Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, he suggests that God gives and forgives so that we can become joyful givers and forgivers. God's redemption allows us to redeem difficult situations and recreate the good with God as our source of strength. According to Volf, we live out God's purpose for us as we receive God's grace and become instruments of God's love.

Miroslav challenges our notions of God as the negotiator with whom we can make deals or the divine Santa Claus—the God that showers us with undeserved giving and forgiving. Make no mistake, God has a purpose for us, and there is accountability. Our grateful response to being forgiven is to forgive others. Repentance is not a condition of forgiveness, but its necessary consequence. During a Lenten study on forgiveness, many asked if we should be reconciled to those who are unrepentant or unchanged. It is a

subtle but important nuance that sometimes we can be reconciled in our hearts but choose not to subject ourselves to further hurt. The very act of forgiveness may become the agent of change.

If we explore this story with Volf's paradigm in mind, kingdom values do not keep score and there is always enough love to go around. We are asked to choose being in relationship over being right. This comes at great cost to our pride, our sense of entitlement or even our belief in what is right. But we are enabled to do this by the grace we have already been given by God. This parable reminds us that God's priority is love.

God gives us glimpses of this in sacred moments such as at the bedside of a loved one or in a vulnerable exchange of truth between friends. Opening our arms to give or receive grace means we let go of things that divide us and invite the possibilities of relationship. We all long to be welcomed home and we have all been empowered to run towards the other. A heart of gratitude encourages generosity.

The season of Lent offers us a time to reflect upon where our hearts might be changed. This parable challenges us to search for ways to be reconciled to God and one another. Is there one in your life to whom you could extend grace or who is waiting for you to come home? What do you harbor that creates distance from God or others? Is there a stranger in your midst that seems lost and in need of knowing God's love? I pray that God will reveal to each of us how we may live God's extravagant grace.

Katherine Jefferts Schori, our former Presiding Bishop, wrote these words. "We all ache for a community that takes us in, with all our warts and quirks and petty meanness-and yet they still celebrate when they see us coming! That vision of home going and homecoming that underlies our deepest spiritual yearnings, is also the job assignment each one of us gets in baptism. Go home, and while you're at it, help to build a home for everyone else on earth. For none of us can truly find our rest in God until all our brothers and sisters have also been welcomed home like the prodigal." Amen.