

The Way Home **Luke 15: 11b-32**

The Home We Long For

Have you ever had a time when you missed home more than ever? For me, it was the first evening of basic military training in Korea. It was January, and it was bitterly cold. That evening, I was standing in line to get oil for the heater in the barracks, and the wind was cutting right through me. It was freezing. Everything felt unfamiliar. I was hungry. The weather was harsh. Even the evening sunset looked strangely sad. I missed home so much.

If I had been home, I would have been lying on a warm floor under a blanket, reading comic books, eating snacks, drinking Coke, just relaxing, and then sitting down to a warm meal made by my mother. But there I was in boot camp, being yelled at by the drill instructors, unable even to move in the cold, just standing there trembling. I felt so miserable, and I missed home so deeply. I think people often realize how precious home is only after they have gone through hardship.

Estrangement

In today's scripture, we meet a son who comes to realize, after much suffering, how precious home really is. This passage is well known as the parable of the prodigal son. A man has two sons, and the younger one says, "Father, someday when you die, the inheritance will come to me anyway, so give it to me now."

If your child said that to you today, what would you say? You would probably be furious. You might say, "You ungrateful child! Are you wishing for your father to die?" But this father does what the son asks. He sells part of his land and gives the younger son the share that would have belonged to him. Suddenly, the son has a large amount of money in his hands, and excited by it, he leaves for a distant country and lives wildly and recklessly.

The younger son, leaving his father's side and giving his heart to the things of the world, clearly shows us the essence of sin. The theologian Paul Tillich does not define sin simply as doing morally bad things. Tillich says that the essence of sin is separation, or estrangement. Think about Jesus' image of the vine and the branches. What happens if a branch is cut off from the vine? A branch separated from the source of its life may look alive for a little while, but soon it withers and dies. Tillich says that when we tear ourselves away from the source of life, from the One to whom we were meant to remain joined, that broken condition itself is sin. That is the deepest tragedy of human life.

When we are captured by desire, greed, and things other than God, and become cut off from God, we inevitably lose our true identity as God's beloved children. What happens to a life like that? At first, it may look enjoyable. But in the end, as today's scripture shows us, it becomes a life lived like a pig in a pigpen. Dirty, hungry, shameful, and stripped even of the last dignity a human being should have. That is what it means to be alienated from God.

Lent is a time to pause and ask: Am I still connected to God, the source of life? Or am I living in a pigpen, alienated from God? Lent is a time to come to our senses. In today's passage, it says that the younger son, after living like a pig in the pigpen, came to his senses. The most important step in returning home is this: to come to our senses.

And when we do come to our senses, that itself is grace. Even if not much about us has changed yet, that is okay. The very first step of waking up and turning back is already a blessing.

There is a church in Austin, Texas, called Gateway Community Church, founded by Pastor John Burke. Many people came to that church who were drug addicts, alcoholics, criminals, and people who had hit rock bottom in life. In other words, people who had been rolling around in the pigpen.

In the interviews included in Pastor John's book, many of them said they were so ashamed of themselves that they thought, "Only after I quit this addiction, only after I clean up my life a little more, will I finally be able to go to church. God will only accept me when I become at least somewhat decent." They felt their lives were such a mess that even God would not accept them.

But that is a false illusion. It is the illusion that in order to return to the Father's house, I must first wash off all my filth, change into clean clothes, and then confidently open the door and walk in. That is exactly the devil's most subtle lie: "You do not have the right to return until you become perfect. You do not have the right to return until you become worthy of being loved."

So why were these people able to step into Pastor John's church? They came because they saw the sign hanging at the entrance. At the entrance, on the website, in the bulletin, all throughout the church building, there were signs that said, "No Perfect People Allowed." And when people saw that, they came back to church.

It meant that clean, problem-free, self-righteous, "perfect" people did not need to come. Instead, those who had been rolling around in the pigpen of life, those who were wounded, those who had finally admitted they could not do it on their own, were invited to come just as they were.

Think about the prodigal son in today's passage. When he came out of the pigpen, do you think he took a nice shower, put on clean clothes, sprayed on some perfume, and then went back to his father? No. He was starving. He could not even get enough pig food to eat. He was in no condition to worry about any of that. He simply came to this realization: "I cannot live like this anymore. I cannot do this by my own strength." So, still wearing those ragged clothes that smelled like pigs, still covered with filth, he got up and turned toward his father's house. The church is a place where we do not need to wear a mask to hide how broken we are. In fact, that is exactly the kind of place the church should be. When we come to the place of grace just as we are—whether the old smell of sin still clings to our lives, whether we are wounded, whether we are broken—God enters through those very cracks and fills us with grace. So do not feel like you have to wear a mask and pretend to be a perfect saint. And do not think, "I will come to the Lord after I work harder, after I become worthy of being loved."

There is a poem by Jeong Ho-seung called *Shattered into Pieces*. He wrote it after accidentally breaking a clay Buddha statue he had bought at a Buddhist historic site. Let me read it to you.

The Buddha made of clay / that I bought in Lumbini / fell onto the wooden floor / and shattered into pieces.
Its arms in pieces, its legs in pieces, / its neck in pieces, its toes in pieces, / shattered into pieces.
I quickly bent down, / took out the superglue I had kept in the drawer, and began to glue it back together.

At that moment, / gently stroking my poor head, / which is always trying not to break,
the Buddha said to me:

When you are shattered into pieces, / you can receive the shattered pieces.
When you are shattered into pieces, you can live as one shattered into pieces.

Even if we change the Buddha statue into a crucifix, the meaning still remains. “The clay crucifix I bought in Jerusalem fell onto the wooden floor and shattered into pieces... At that moment, gently stroking my poor head, always trying not to break, Jesus said to me: When you are shattered into pieces, you can receive the shattered pieces. When you are shattered into pieces, you can live as one shattered into pieces.” This is God’s grace toward us.

The Father’s Love

The real highlight of the parable of the prodigal son is not the son’s repentance, but the father’s overwhelming love for him. On the road home, the son keeps repeating to himself, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” He is still a son, but he mistakenly believes he no longer has the right to be one.

But when the son reaches the edge of the village, something completely unexpected happens. The father, who has been betrayed and deeply hurt, throws away all concern for dignity, runs out barefoot, wraps his arms around that dirty son who smells like pigs, and kisses him. He does not say, “You fool! Why did you do this? Where did all that money go?” He does not question him or condemn him. Simply because his lost child has come home, he puts the best robe on him and a ring on his finger. He is saying once again, “You are my son.” This is God’s unchanging love, an overwhelming love that goes far beyond anything we could imagine. And this is the home to which we must return. There are times when we ourselves collapse under the weight of guilt. But even when we come back smelling like the prodigal son, unworthy and ashamed, God runs toward us from far away, embraces us, and says, “You are my son. You are my beloved daughter.” God restores our holy identity as children of God. And when that identity is restored, our lives begin to change. We do not do this alone. Just as the father clothes the son with a new robe and puts a ring on his finger, God is the One who makes it happen with us and for us.

Lift up your eyes for a moment and look at the cross we are making together during this season of Lent. Each week, we offer prayers of confession and place a ceramic shard on the cross, laying before God our sins and the burdens deep within our hearts. And little by little, you can see what grace is doing. Our broken pieces are being gathered and transformed into a beautiful mosaic cross. No matter what we have done, no matter who we are, no matter how far we may have wandered from the life God desires for us, we are warmly welcomed in the Father’s house. We are God’s beloved and precious children.

So this week, I hope you will be the kindest person to yourself. Instead of condemning yourself and beating yourself up over your mistakes, your shortcomings, and your brokenness, turn instead to God in prayerful confession and return to the Father. Even if the smell of the pigpen of sin still lingers, that is all right. The Lord welcomes you back with joy and embraces you. So rest in God’s overwhelming love. And may this be a week in which you draw closer to the Father’s house, to our heavenly Father who loves us, where true joy and true rest are found. Amen.