



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Coming Home_ - The Fourth Sunday of Lent- 3_27_2022

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So the Prodigal Son is probably my favorite Bible story. I find myself going back to it again and again, whenever I'm confronted by questions of forgiveness or repentance, salvation, or resurrection. The reach of God's grace, the power of suffering, the poison of resentment, the joy of surrender, the beauty of reconciliation. I mean, this has it all, doesn't it? Entire books have been written about this one parable. In fact, an entire book has been written about a painting about this parable.

Our theologian in residence last week called it a masterclass in storytelling. It's both simple and yet it has so many different angles, so many different avenues you can go down. It always seems to have something new to say. And I suppose it doesn't hurt that it's wrapped in a classic family drama that most of us can probably relate to on some level. The overachiever, the rule follower, the rebel, the black sheep of the family, the forgiving father who also manages to take us for granted. We know all of them, don't we? If not in your own family, certainly in your extended family or perhaps even in your workplace or in your friendship circles.

I've certainly known each of them at different stages in my life. In fact, if I pay close attention, I can see myself still rotating through each of the characters sometimes in the course of a single day. I start off in the morning with my coffee and the tunes. I'm the forgiving father. Yeah, you can just let it all roll off my back. I just want everyone to flourish in their vocation and their ministry. I just want to help everyone. Until, without warning, I get pulled down into the role of the resentful son, quietly seething that I'm not getting the credit I deserve, or I'm not getting the respect that I think I'm owed. Until later that evening with God's help and usually a good long walk, I come to myself. And I realize I've been lost in my own ego and my own insecurities and my own fears once again. And I find the grace to let it go and to come home.

I'm curious, who do you identify with most in the story? Do we have any prodigal sons with us this morning? Have you ever journeyed far from home in search of the good life, so determined to do it your way that you didn't mind burning every bridge you could on the way out the door? Do you know what it's like to

hunger for something more, to feel that God-shaped hole in your heart and to be driven out into the world to fill it with every false idol that seems to come along. Career, status, food, money, success, drugs. The list goes on and on.

Have you been down that road long enough to discover that killing yourself to get into the best schools so you can be hired into the best firms didn't make you as happy as you were promised? And in fact can make you just as overworked and miserable as the rest of us. Have you been in that distant country long enough to see it all come crashing down when the bills get too high and the debt starts to pile up? When your health fails after years of neglect, when the high becomes impossible to maintain, when our excuses run out and our family and friends finally walk out.

Of course, as prodigal sons, we know don't we, that as terrible as all of that sounds, when it does all come crashing down, that's actually the beginning of our story, isn't it? Because that's the moment where we finally have a choice. Do we blame others? Do we cast ourselves as the victim? Do we stubbornly double down on all the things that got us to where we were, or do we come to ourselves, take a leap of faith and finally see what everyone else has been trying to tell us? We are lost.

And the beauty of knowing that we are lost, we no longer have to be in control. We tried it our way. We no longer need to have the answers. We just need to turn to turn, to turn. And in our turning open us up to being found, to being found by the one, the only one who can fill our restless hearts. As prodigal sons, we know that the end of that story is really the beginning of our salvation because that's the day when we finally start to die to our old life and begin to rise to new life.

How about the elder son? Are there any responsible rule followers out there? Anyone here have a strong sense of fairness, who's perfectly good at living within your means, who doesn't mind staying behind and doing the right thing, who loves tending the fields of home, caring for your aging parents, doing the day-to-day unappreciated, quiet work of getting things done that just need doing? Do we see our prodigal brothers and sisters go through their little adventures spectacularly flaming out again and again, and wonder, you know, does anyone else see just how selfish they are? Is anyone keeping track of how much damage they do? After all, we know, don't we? We know who's going to clean up the mess half the time.

I can remember getting A's in high school, working hard, trying to buy my new car, helping out around the house. My brother, he's out surfing, smoking pot with his buddies, after school, getting picked up by the police. On a good day. What was his punishment? A summer long trip to Europe with a friend, no doubt, with the hoping that he would somehow learn the lessons that he'd

managed to miss at home. You can imagine how that went. Right? I don't have to tell you the rest of that story or the 3:00 AM call from the embassy in Berlin.

I can remember thinking, hello, I'm the one graduating with honors here. Where's my trip to Europe? And that's another thing, by the way, is it not just a little exasperating and to watch these prodigals skate through life as they do, walking between the raindrops, getting away with things that we never dreamed of doing? Things that we know if we had tried them, we would have been the first to get caught. What do they get? A tearful embrace, a trip to Europe.

Ah, but you prodigals, you guys always know what to say, don't you? But you don't fool us. You may have fooled Dad with that fony, pious speech you cooked up. We know it wasn't real. You've never been to church in your life. The only thing that you were really sorry for is that it all blew up in your face. We know that the real test is what are you going to do after the party? Are you going to set the alarm, plan to get up early to help clean up? Are you going to be joining me out in the fields? Are you going to go around to the neighbors and apologize for the scandal you created? And by the way, do you have any plans to thank me for holding this all together so that you would have a home to come back to?

Oh, we can go on and on, can't we? And that's the problem, isn't it? If the prodigals come to God by doing it all wrong, what's the path of those of us who seem to do it all right? If the path of suffering and failure leads them to God, where does the path of rules and responsibility lead us? The danger for us is a poison of our own making. There's nothing wrong with staying behind and being responsible.

The question we always need to ask is are we doing so joyfully? Are we giving ourselves freely out of love? Is it life giving? Do we offer ourselves with no expectations of anything in return or does it have strings attached? Are we secretly keeping score and building up a long list of resentments? Are we experiencing freedom in our labors? Or in the words of our brother in the parable, do we actually see ourselves as slaves, slaves to the rules, slaves to what's expected of us, slaves to our need for approval?

To the rest of the world, we can look like the model child, can't we? But inside we can be just as lost. But unlike our prodigal brothers and sisters who tend to go big when they get lost, ours can quietly creep up on us. Our desire to follow the rules can drift into becoming the rule enforcer, the joyless hall monitor, the nattering complainer, the grievance collector. Our love of fairness and justice can end up making us demanding and judgmental, and in the denial of our own spiritual hunger and our own call to adventure, we can become jealous and prudish.

The question we must ask is if in the zeal to be responsible, have we lost the joy of giving ourselves away? That's the challenge because yes, by all accounts, we

do have the right to be angry and resentful, don't we? There should be a price to be paid before forgiveness is offered. You do the crime, you do the time, right? That's the way the world works, isn't it? That's the way we were raised. But it's not God's ways. God invites us to a new economy where we are already forgiven before we even know what we've done, where we are already loved before we even know who God is.

But just as the prodigal sons had to let go of their way of doing life in order to discover it, so must we. When the Father says to us, all I have is yours, it's always been yours. Can we see the brokenness within us that's kept us from embracing it? Embracing what's been in front of us all along? We need to let go and let go of our anger, our judgements, and we too need to turn. We need to turn away from our need to be rewarded and recognized, so like the Father we can forgive freely and love wastefully.

Yeah, our brother squandered his inheritance, but by withholding and resenting, we squander ours. Is that why we never asked for the party for us and our friends? In our calculating minds, we convinced ourselves that if we had to ask, well, somehow it wouldn't count. Or were we afraid to ask, convinced that we weren't worthy of it, that we somehow hadn't done enough? Like our prodigal brothers and sisters, we too need to take a leap of faith and it just might be. It just might be true that we don't have to earn our Father's love, that there's nothing more we need to do. It's been ours all along. God already likes us and always has.

The story ends on a cliffhanger because we too have a choice to make. So what will it be? My brother has gone inside. He's done breaking hearts for the time being, anyway. And now our father stands in the doorway waiting for us, waiting for us to take hold of the inheritance that has always been ours. It's getting cold outside. The sun is setting. The party beckons. Can you hear the music? Can you hear the laughter, the joy? I think the dancing has started. Will we join the party? Will we too come home?

Amen