

COME HOME TO YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER

LUKE 15:11-32

Home. What is it? Robert Frost, the poet, offered this definition of home: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Not exactly the most positive spin on the concept of home, but I think I understand what Frost meant! Unfortunately, home is not always a positive environment. Nevertheless, home has become an idealized, sentimental concept in our culture. And nowhere is that more apparent than at Christmas. “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”... You’ve probably already sung or hummed that great, old song again this year, right? This Advent season I want to consider with you the biblical connection between Christmas and home. Home is something we understand but find hard to explain. Home is something we long for but find difficult to define. I like this observation someone offered, “Home is not a place. It’s a person. Home is not... an address with a mortgage. Home is a passion. Home is where the heart is and the heart is where Jesus is.”

Last week we looked at Psalm 90:1 (NLT) which says, “Lord, through all the generations, you have been our home!” Now today, I want you to hear again the most well-known story Jesus ever told. It’s essentially a story about home and coming home. What can we learn again from that great story? A woman by the name of Jolene was putting her 4 year old daughter to bed one evening. Jolene read her the story we just read. They discussed how the younger son had taken his inheritance and left home, living it up until he had nothing left. Then, when he couldn’t even eat as well as the pigs, he went home to his father, who welcomed him. Jolene saw a teachable moment with her young daughter, so she asked what she had learned from Jesus’ story. After thinking it over for a moment, the 4 year old said, “Never leave home without your credit card!” Hopefully, you and I can learn something else from Jesus’ story than that! Let’s think, first of all, about...

THE BARRIERS TO COMING HOME

Jesus’ story has three main characters: a father and two sons. The father is a picture of God and what He is like. The two sons represent two different responses to God that human beings tend to make. At first glance, these two sons look like polar opposites. But the more I read this story, the more I see similarities between the two brothers. The first barrier to coming home to your Heavenly Father is sinful independence. Let’s all admit it - here’s something inside every human being that wants nothing to do with God. We just manifest that tendency in different ways. The younger son is the blatant, obvious one. He’d convinced himself life would be a whole lot more fun if he didn’t have to hang out with Dad. Dad’s rules were too strict. Dad’s expectations were too high. Life would be a whole lot better if he could get away from Dad’s watchful eye. There was a whole lot of interesting stuff to check out in the “far country.” Who was Dad to say it was bad for you? The “far country” looked pretty fun to this young man. More than anything else, he just wanted to live his life independently from his father.

Many people look at God the same way that young man looked at his dad. They see God as a barrier to life’s pleasures and enjoyment. They think the Bible is just this

outdated book of rules and so they react with an overwhelming, “Ugh!” They resent God saying that certain behaviors in life are bad for you. God seems like a celestial kill-joy who resents people having fun and a good time. Many of these people have to find out the truth the hard way in life. They have to find out for themselves that things like drug and alcohol abuse lead to a dead end, that sexual promiscuity leaves you shamed and broken, and that worshipping money and the things money can buy leave you hollow and enslaved. God has already told everyone that and more in the Bible, but it just doesn’t matter. They insist on finding out for themselves and they usually hurt many other people along the way. It’s much like this young man who hurt his dad. People who insist that their own, personal independence is the highest value in the universe ending up hurt their parents, their spouses, their kids, and, most of all, themselves.

The independence of the older son is much less obvious but just as real. He looked like he loved and respected Dad. He did everything he was supposed to do. He crossed all his “t’s” and dotted all his “i’s”. When people looked at him, they said, “What a fine young man! I’ll bet his dad is proud of him.” In high school, he was selected “Most Likely to Succeed.” But Jesus’ story reveals that while he lived in Dad’s home, he didn’t really understand Dad. He didn’t love what Dad loved. He didn’t care about what Dad cared about. And, saddest of all, he didn’t really enjoy Dad. Dad would have been happy to throw some parties for his older son, but he wasn’t interested. Life was all about doing the right thing, getting what you deserve, reaping what you sow, and earning your own way. I have a hunch the older boy didn’t love his dad any more than the younger one. He just showed his lack of love differently. In reality, he wanted to live as independently from his father as his younger brother.

Here’s what makes me nervous about Jesus’ story. Churches are full of older son types. So are pulpits, for that matter. Sure, every church has folk in it that have gone out and sampled every sordid pleasure the far country had to offer, but most church folk resemble the older brother more than the younger one. We look like we love God. We try hard to do everything we’re supposed to do. People may even look at us and say, “What a fine Christian! I’ll bet God is proud of him or her!” We, too, can spend a lot of time in God’s home – the local church, let’s call it – and yet not share God’s heart. We don’t necessarily love what God loves, or care about what God cares about. How much we really enjoy God might be called into question, too. Yes, we appreciate God sending Jesus to die for our sins, but we keep on trying to earn and deserve His love afterwards anyway. Frankly, we find ways to keep God at a distance – unwilling to let Him into the deepest parts of our lives. You can have a whole lot of God stuff in your life, but still live largely independent of God. We church folk can share an awful irony with the older son in Jesus’ story – we’re home, but not really home. We might live in close proximity to God, but we still live independently of Him.

Another barrier to coming home to your Heavenly Father is spiritual indifference. Think about that younger son with me again. He just used the home he grew up in. It offered love and security, but he took all of it for granted and gave nothing in return. Dad worked and sacrificed for that boy, but Junior just couldn’t work up any gratitude. When he left home, he made no effort to stay in touch. Home had served its purpose and he

was done with it. There was no bond to maintain, no relationship to nurture, no debt to acknowledge. After some 35 years of ministry, I can tell you the single biggest obstacle most people have in coming home to their Heavenly Father. Sheer indifference. Our offices, our neighborhoods, our schools, even our homes are full of people who view God as largely irrelevant to their daily lives. Some say they will seek Him sometime in the future as if God can be safely postponed until we are ready to deal with Him.

Do you know what ended the younger son's indifference? Pain. The money was gone. The good time friends were history. He got very hungry. Even pig food started to look good. A face to face encounter with pain woke that boy up and made him realize his life was missing something. I've seen that as a pastor many times. God often has to get the attention of a spiritually indifferent person through the gift of pain. Her marriage fails. His job ends. Their personal finances blow up. Her health fails. His plans hit a brick wall. God uses pain to plant a question in people's hearts, "Is this it? Is this the sum total of my life? Is there something more to life that I haven't found yet?" Pain often starts the spiritually indifferent person on his or her journey home to God. Just like the younger son in Jesus' story.

There was plenty of indifference in that older son, too, however. It just looked differently. You can see it in his attitude toward his younger brother and Dad's love for the kid. Never even once did he walk down the long driveway to the mailbox and look in either direction to see if his brother was coming home. By no means did he ever come to his dad and say, "Dad, if you want, I'll go look for him and see if he wants to come home." Do you have a heart for lost people? Do lost people matter to you? Good church folk – and I'm one of you – this is how we reveal our own spiritual indifference. What matters most to God doesn't matter much to us. What matters most to Him is seeing human beings – creatures made in His image, but broken and busted up by sin – come home to Him. He doesn't want anyone left out. He wants them all to come home. And He wants to use you and me to help them find the way home.

Do you pray for anyone who doesn't know God? By name? Are you seeking to build a relationship with anyone who is today far from God? Are you asking God to give you an opportunity to get into a spiritual conversation with someone who's out in the "far country"? May I say this to you? If you have no heart for lost people, you don't have the heart of God. You may have grown up in church, you may have read the Bible from cover to cover, you may know and sing 1,000 hymns and praise songs, but if you are indifferent to people who don't have a personal and eternal relationship with Jesus this Christmas, then you are essentially indifferent to God. That older son served his dad, but didn't really love him. You can serve God, in a way, but not really love Him, too. You can miss the real home of God which is the heart of God. Sinful independence and spiritual indifference – they can stop you from coming home to your Heavenly Father. But, let's think about something more positive and edifying, shall we? How about...

THE BLESSINGS IN COMING HOME

Based on this story, the first blessing you experience when you come home is discovering that God has made you His child forever. Nobody is automatically a child of God. First of all, then, you become His child the moment you put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord – the One who forgives you and leads you for the rest of your life. When that relationship begins, God adopts you into His family. Here’s how the Bible puts it, “But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.... You are members of God’s family.” (Jo 1:12, Ep 2:19 NLT)

A young woman by the name of Alexandra Flynn from Fremont, Nebraska, was really looking forward to her high school homecoming dance. She left home in high spirits, but she didn’t have her high school ID card with her. When the man at the door refused her admission without her ID, she went home to get it. Unable to find it, Alexandra’s mom went with her back to the dance to identify her and to explain. But, again, Alexandra was refused admission. Now, Alexandra was the student body president, played cello in the Nebraska all-state orchestra, was on the honor roll, was her school’s number one cheerleader, and had herself spent hours along with others decorating the gym for the homecoming dance, she was still not admitted. Did I mention she was also the homecoming queen? But she never did get in. Not everyone is going to get into Heaven. Despite the persistent myth that all you need to do is to be a relatively good person, without a relationship with Jesus, you won’t get through the door. You need the right ID and that’s only offered through God’s Son, Jesus.

Secondly, you can rediscover the fact that God has already made you His child. Born again people can still find the “far country” tempting. We can blow it big time. We can slap God the Father across His face, so to speak, by trying to find fullness of life in other places other than God. Our Heavenly Father is faithful, then, to send us the gift of pain so that, like the younger son in Jesus’ story, we come to our senses. We see the truth. All those alternatives to God produce shame not joy. They create fear, not excitement. They result in death, not life. Now, the younger son thought he’d forfeited his sonship. He thought Dad had disowned him. But he was willing to go back just to be a hired hand in Dad’s business. He didn’t yet understand the heart of a father or a mother. No matter how much your son or daughter disappoints you, he is still your son; she is still your daughter. God is like that and more. If you have ever truly been a child of God, you will always be a child of God. Nevertheless, some children of God desperately need to come home. They need to get right with their Heavenly Father.

Wherever you might be in life, you can rediscover the joy of knowing that you’re God’s child. Some of us here today might be a bit like that older son. He took his relationship with his father for granted. Yes, you can take your relationship with your Heavenly Father for granted, too. There was no joy in that older boy – no celebration, no gratitude, no enjoyment of his dad. Child of God, let me ask you a question this Christmas season? Would anyone know how much you enjoy your Heavenly Father by your face, your words, your attitudes, or your actions? Does anyone know how much you treasure and cherish being God’s child by observing your life? Does the sheer wonder of what God has done for you and in you fill you up every once in a while and overflow up and out of you? Does joy ever just ooze out of you? Enthusiasm? Praise?

Martin Luther, the man God used to kick off the Protestant Reformation, had a unique relationship with his wife, Katherine. They could sort of nail each other to the wall whenever necessary. Once Martin Luther was so depressed over a prolonged period of time that one day, Katherine, his wife, came downstairs dressed all in black. Martin asked, "Who died?" Katherine said, "God has died." Martin said, "God has not died." And she said, "Well, live like it and act like it." My friend, do you live every day in light of the fact that God is alive, in control, and is moving both your life and human history toward His plan and purpose? Would someone know that by looking at you?

A second blessing of coming home is discovering that God is unbelievably wonderful. The father in this story had been deeply humiliated and shamed by his younger son. God has been deeply humiliated and shamed by you and me – our sin, our rebellion, and our preference for living in the far country over living with Him. Most people don't really get how deeply all of us have offended an absolutely holy God. Don't you think that younger son was blown away by his dad's response? He didn't even want to think about the worst-case scenario. The best-case scenario he could imagine was a rather stiff, cold audience with Dad and maybe – just maybe – being allowed to work for Dad in some low paying, entry level position. Can you imagine with me what went through that boy's head when he saw his dad running toward him that day? "Who's that? Is that Dad? What's he doing? Maybe he just can't wait for me to get home before he beats the tar out of me!" And then to be swept up in those loving arms! To be held close – dirty, pig smell everywhere, ragged clothes – to be wept over, kissed, cherished, and treasured. His little plan to try and pay Dad back by getting hired was swept away as so much foolishness. What could he do in the face of such love and compassion except just stand there speechless, numb, take it in, and receive it as a gift?

Let's use the gift of imagination that God gave us just now. Close your eyes and imagine with me that father running toward his son. Can you see it? Now imagine Jesus hanging on the cross. That image of the father running toward his son is a picture of what happened at the cross. At the cross, God ran toward you in this person of His Son, Jesus. At the cross, your Heavenly Father threw His arms around lost people like you and me, kissed us, cherished us, and treasured us. When you understand what happened at the cross of Jesus, your own feeble plans of trying to get into Heaven based on your own merits are exposed as utterly useless. Trying to earn God's mercy through your own on-again/off-again goodness... trying to impress God by doing religious-looking stuff. I don't understand God's love for you, for me, for all the younger son types and all the older son types that have ever lived. I preach about it. I believe it. But I don't understand it this Christmas or any Christmas. I'm thankful I don't have to understand it to experience it. In the face of such overwhelming compassion and love, I instead just stand there speechless, numb, take it in and receive it as a gift.

A man by the name of J. Granger tells about the time his son called home. Scott was a mess. Years of drug abuse had included stealing from his own family, manipulating his mom and dad, and just failing in about every way a person can fail. Frankly, it had been a relief not to hear from Scott at all for two whole years. Scott told his dad he'd been through a rehab program a year and a half ago that provided something no other

program had offered. "I met Jesus Christ," Scott said. "I've been forgiven of my past. I want to ask you and Mom to forgive me, too." He told his dad he was now helping other addicts get straightened out. Frankly, Jay was torn between hope and cynicism. Scott – this well-groomed, bright-eyed young man who arrived at the airport – looked like a stranger to his dad. In the days that followed, Scott told his parents how, in the midst of drug withdrawal, he'd seen a vision of Jesus on the cross and cried out to Him for help. His withdrawal symptoms ended instantly. That experience led him to a church. "I asked Jesus to be my Lord," he explained to his parents, "and my life hasn't been the same since." The change in Scott's life was so dramatic and so real that his mom and dad couldn't ignore it. Today, Jesus has given them the same new life He gave to their prodigal son.

Every time you see the cross, you should be reminded of home. You're reminded of your Heavenly Father's unbelievable love. The communion table serves much the same purpose. The Lord's Table is an eternal, ongoing invitation to come home to your Father – maybe for the first time today – or maybe for the 100th time. The Lord's Supper is the embrace of God. Communion is God's way of hugging you and welcoming you home. It's here we are reminded powerfully of the endless blessings of being home with our Heavenly Father. What barriers keep you from coming home today? Confess them. Renounce them. Hand them over to your Father. And then by faith in God and His grace, claim the blessings of coming home and the joy of being God's child. In the name of Jesus, I say to one and all today, "Come home!"