

Walking Back Home

[Luke 15:11-24](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, July 28, 2002

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

The end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started, And to know the place for the first time. --
T.S. Eliot

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most beloved of all Jesus' stories. But it is important to understand this parable in its context. At the beginning of his 15th chapter, Luke tells us that the Pharisees and Scribes were complaining about Jesus. Imagine that. This time they were saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus responds to that charge not by saying, "Well, sinner is such a harsh word," which is how contemporary society would respond. No, as is typical of him, Jesus responds by telling the righteous three parables. In the first story a shepherd leaves his 99 sheep to find the one that is lost. He searches the wilderness, and on finding it he says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost." In the second story a poor woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She tears the house apart looking for it. On finding it, she also says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost." After both stories, Jesus says that even heaven rejoices when the lost are found.

Then he begins his third parable: A man had two sons. The younger one, it's always the younger one, said to his father, "I want my share of the inheritance right now." There was no ancient custom of a father giving his children their inheritance before he died. What this boy is asking for is outrageous, and the implications of it are outrageous as well. Essentially he is saying to his father, "I can't wait for you to die." But what is most outrageous is that the father gave the kid what he wanted. He divided his assets between his two sons. Interestingly, this means that the elder son benefited from his brother's impetuosity.

The elder son then maintained his share of the family property, which was probably the larger portion. He worked the land, lived conservatively, and preserved the family estate. But the younger one liquidated his assets and traveled to a distant country.

The sole purpose of the distant country is to get away from home. Because home is the place where you are known, and for many of us that feels like suffocation. They don't like being known for who they were as children, particularly if they were children who weren't number one, who weren't the best, strongest, smartest, most popular, and who didn't receive the biggest portions. Others have very painful memories of home. It was where they were hurt or where they watched their mothers get hurt. Many are terrified that the home of their childhood has some power over their identity. All they want is to get away to some place distant where they can decide for themselves who they are.

A few years ago, my wife and I returned to Long Island for a family reunion. I remember being terrified of this trip. I did not have good memories of that place. In fact, it had been over twenty years since I had been back, and I was thinking that wasn't long enough. I was afraid that if I stepped back into the poor neighborhood where I grew up someone would say, "How did you escape? Well, we're not going to let that happen again." And they wouldn't let me leave. When I left the island as a young man, I was fleeing the factories, gas stations, and 7-elevens where many of my high school friends still work. I wanted to be somebody, and for that I knew I had to go to a distant country.

Like me, many of you also fled to colleges and graduate schools, or to esteemed vocations, or to a marriage, or to a series of achievements and trophies. It doesn't matter: just so long as it happens in a distant country where you are not known for what you were. Maybe Washington D.C. is your distant country, where you have come to work on a new identity.

The prodigal son fled to a place where he was free from home. He was no longer known as his father's other son, and no longer restricted by the rules and morality of his father. So he used his freedom to squander his birthright in "dissolute living." That's Luke's sanitized term. The elder brother said he wasted it all on prostitutes, which sounds like an elder brother. Regardless, they both make it clear that the kid spent all he had.

That's the problem with the distant country. Even if you are economical with your resources and do not live carelessly, you will still find that it isn't long before the distant country uses you up. That's because the distant country isn't your home. It isn't valued for what it is, but only for being distant. Not home. As long as you are not home, you are on the run, and you can only run for so long. Eventually you run out of achievements, jobs, resumes, health, and new ideas for self-improvement. Then you just feel spent.

"When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything." Pigs? What was a good Jewish boy doing feeding the pigs? Worse, eating like a pig? Well, you are always amazed by the things you find yourself doing in a distant country.

"But when he came to himself," he remembered his father's house. Those two things always happen at the same time. We remember the father's house and it is then that we remember who we are. This is so important. Your real father's house is not on Long Island, or in Ohio, Texas, California, or Africa. It has nothing to do with where you grew up or where your parents lived, and everything to do with your Heavenly Father who is waiting for you to come home to him. He is the one who establishes your true identity. At the core of that identity is not a poor kid trying to make good, but a rich kid trying not to blow it all. Neither your success or your failures are at the core of you. The core of your identity is determined by the Holy Spirit who has adopted you into the Son's own beloved relationship with the Father. Who are you? The beloved of God. That's who you are.

It was his home you actually left long ago, because you just couldn't believe you were beloved. You were so certain you had to buy the love, you threw yourself into so many plans and strategies for happiness that have left you in the distant country of disappointment, loneliness, and even despair. But somewhere along the way in your journey through that place, usually after you are spent, the Holy Spirit brings you the memory of that Father's home where you don't have to earn love. When that happens, you also come to yourself. You see what you are doing and exclaim, "This isn't me. I've been slopping hogs so long, I've started to act like a hog." You are not a hog. You don't have to grab at life. Life is already given to you as a blessed inheritance. But you do have to return home to the father to enjoy it.

The prodigal knows that he has made huge mistakes in the distant country and he doesn't deserve to have a place in his father's home. But he is hungry, there is no place else for him to go, and the memory of his father's house will not leave him alone. So he starts down the road home. As he does he rehearses the lines he will use when he gets there. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

"But while he was still far off," we are told, "his father saw him." How many days had the father wandered down that road that led away from home? How often did he tarry a while at the gate? How many times did he look up from the fields and gaze across the horizon, searching for his lost son?

Then one day he saw him -- beaten, ragged, tired, shuffling his way home. And the father tore down the road, with his robe flying in the wind behind him. He threw his arms around his boy, and showered him with kisses. The poor kid doesn't even get to finish his little speech before the father cries out, "Quickly, bring my best robe, a ring, and sandals for his feet. Kill the fatted calf. Let us eat and celebrate." Then again we hear the words. "Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost."

That is what happens in every worship service. We begin the hour with confession and rehearsing new deals we will make with God. But the Holy Spirit interrupts us to say, "Heaven is rejoicing because the lost is found." Remember this celebration was not the prodigal son's idea, but the Father's. If we are paying attention, we are embarrassed by the grace we receive when we come home. It doesn't matter. The father

is so excited he commands rejoicing.

The elder brother, who is usually so good at obeying commands, has a hard time with this one. He is placed in Jesus' story to embody the Pharisees and Scribes who refuse to enter heaven's celebration over the return of the sinners because it just isn't fair. They are right about that. It isn't fair. When the father comes to his pouting eldest son, he doesn't try to justify his younger brother. He does remind him of the relationships. He calls the eldest his "son," and the prodigal, "your brother."

Then the father reminds the responsible eldest son that he has always been home. "All that is mine is yours," he says. But the eldest, who never left, has never been at home because he had been trying to earn what had already been given to him. No country is as distant to the father as the land of pride.

Finally, the father invited the eldest son to come home -- to the place of rejoicing. Come to the place where love isn't earned, but it is given away. Come to the place where those who are lost in the sins of immorality and greed are joined to those lost in the greater sins of hubris and self-righteousness. Come to the place where you are home and where the grace is always extravagant.

We don't know if the elder brother repented of his pride and joined in the joy or not. Perhaps that is by design so you can finish the story with your own choices. But before you write those final lines, remember that the point of this parable is not to be right, or careful, or to do a good job with life. The point is to come home to the father's arms. And you can only get there by grace.

So whether you are the prodigal or the elder brother in this story, isn't it time to stop striving? Isn't it time to claim the beloved identity that is yours by grace. Isn't it time to come home?

Gracious Father, some of us have a hard time finding home because we are blinded by our sins, others by our careful resolve. So give us all the vision of the Holy Spirit to see that home is always as close as your own outstretched arms. Amen.