

THE WAY HOME
REV. MARY MARPLE THIES SERMON
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN
SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
II Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Many biblical scholars have written that, because this parable of the man who had two sons is so exquisitely crafted, it should simply be read and not preached on. Having read it to you, I should just sit down so that we could all meditate on it for next fifteen minutes. However—and you knew that a *however* was coming—this short story is one of those pieces of scripture, like that of the Good Samaritan, the 23rd Psalm and Noah and his ark full of animals, that is so well known that even people who have never stepped into a church are familiar with it. It is so well known that it may be easy to miss some important parts of the story. So I am not going to take what is probably the wise advice of the experts to shut up about now, but rather to explore with you some things we may have missed in our familiarity.

Jesus begins his tale, “There was a man who had two sons.”

The younger son can’t wait for his father to die so he can inherit. Instead he asks for his share up front, essentially telling his father that he wishes he were dead. So the father dies. Oh, not literally. But he dies to what the world recognizes as living because he gives everything up, he puts his will into effect. Did you notice? The father divides his property between the two sons. Both the younger and the older sons receive their shares of the inheritance, leaving the father with nothing, no wealth, no security, no standing, essentially dead. Remember this part.

You know what happens next. The younger son goes off, has a great time, spends all his money and finds himself in dire straits. He is starving and no one cares, no one has pity on him, not a single person shows any compassion. Finally he comes to himself and devises a two-part plan to save himself. He will go home and, in part one of his plan, he will make his apologies to his father, try to appease him, say he is sorry. He will say to his father, “I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” This, he hopes will calm his father’s anger, heal the hurt, diminish the disappointment. Then comes part two. Having gotten on his father’s good side, he will ask for a job as one of his father’s servants. Of course, you and I know that part two can’t work because his father has given everything away.

But let us not tarry, the younger son, having made his plan for salvation, heads home to put his scheme into action. Here is the crux of the story of the father and the younger son. The son never has a chance to put his plan in action. His father must have been watching for him all those days and months that he was gone, for while the son is still a long way from home, his father sees him, recognizes the breadth of his shoulders, the length of his stride, knows his son even from afar and—pay attention here—his father is filled with compassion. He picks up his robes and takes off at a run to meet the son whom he gathers into a huge hug and kisses him.

The son has no chance to try out his plan, for in his father's embrace he knows the plan is worthless. His father's love and compassion and forgiveness are all poured out in that hug. Now right here it is important to notice that the father's forgiveness precedes the son's repentance. All the loneliness, all the guilt, all the lostness, all the self-reliance are gathered up and tossed aside without the son having said a word or done a thing. And the son dies, not literally, of course, but the son who thought that money and good times would make his life worth living, the son who didn't care about the father's love, the son who lived only for himself—that son died in the embrace. He acknowledges that death when he says to his father with painful honesty, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Only in the light of the father's forgiveness is his true brokenness revealed; first the forgiveness then the repentance. The old son is dead and a new son, a new relationship is born. Even the father recognizes the death and resurrection—"This son of mine was dead," he declares, "and is alive."

Now we would expect the story to end here with the big party, but remember this is a story about a man who had two sons. We haven't heard anything about the older son since the division of the inheritance, but now he shows up. He is the good son, the one who stayed home, worked the farm, oversaw the workers, kept the books—did all the right things. But when he learns that his wastrel brother has returned and that, instead of sending him packing, their father has welcomed him back with a big party, he is furious. Like a pouting child, he refuses to join the fun. Can't you see him, a scowl on his face, his arms crossed, pacing back and forth? Well, the father sees him, too, and just as he did with the younger son, he goes out to the older son and pleads with him to come in. But this guy is so consumed with righteous anger that he exaggerates his complaint—"All these years I have been working like a slave for you." He wasn't working for his father. Remember? His father had given him everything. Why wasn't he living as a beloved son rather than a slave? "I have never disobeyed you, never gave you a minute of grief." Obedient, perhaps, but his father may have known many times of grief when the son didn't return the father's love, when he couldn't believe that the father's love didn't have to be earned.

With this son, the father uses words to embrace him. "You are always with me, my companion, and all that is mine is yours. Come, celebrate, join the party for your brother was dead and he is alive. He was lost and he is found."

And here the story ends, but it is not finished. We don't know if the elder brother ever makes his way home, too. We don't know if he is able to receive the love of the father, if he chooses to reconcile with his brother, if he, too, dies to his life of working to create his own salvation, to find new life.

I suspect that the reason that Jesus didn't finish the story is that he left it up to his listeners then and now to finish it for themselves.

So, what do we know that will help us finish the story?

This story, of course, is about God and how God deals with sinners, who just happen to also be God's children, you and me as well as those people we don't like, don't respect, maybe even hate. One Parent of the whole human family. Sadly, at some time or another all of us are lost.

Maybe we are younger siblings who make a mess of our lives, renegades who run away from home, have a good time, fall in with the wrong crowd, get ourselves hooked on something that wrecks our bodies and our relationships. Some of us are younger brothers.

Some of us are older siblings. We are the ones who don't cause trouble, who live prudently, work hard, and are responsible; we believe in fairness and justice; we believe that all the good stuff of life has to be earned.

Some of us are younger brothers and some of us are older brothers and sometimes we are one and sometimes we are the other, but all the time we are in need of God's forgiveness because, one way or another, we are out there on the road wanting to get home.

So here is what we need to ponder as we try to finish the story—

First, in Jesus, God gave up everything so we might know his love. God in Christ emptied himself, as Paul puts it, and humbled himself to the point of death.¹

Second, God is searching for us, watching for our return, waiting to embrace us with open arms, before we even have a chance to say, "I'm sorry."

Third, that grace, that unearned, undeserved forgiveness and love are already there for us. Repentance is not a matter of earning God's love. To repent is to claim that love, to risk living with its embarrassing grace, which can bring us to the point of death, not literal death, of course, but death to an old way of life in which we are trying to save ourselves and a new life of joyful reliance on God's steadfast love.

And lastly, being reconciled to God means also being reconciled to others. The love we know from God is to be shared. We can't join God's party until we are able to party with those we think don't deserve to be there but who are fellow recipients of God's mercy. In fact, none of us deserves to be at the party; no one can earn an invitation. The wonder is that God invites everyone to celebration.

So how do we finish the story? We do so with our own lives, allowing ourselves to be found and forgiven and loved by God, walking into the banquet hall and taking our seat at the table. God's child, safe at home.

¹ Philippians 2:7-8.