

Sermon: March 27. 2022

Come Home
(Luke 15)

Losing hurts, doesn't it? Whether it's a basketball game (my bracket lifted its head in Sheol this morning) or a piece of jewelry, when we lose, we suffer. Turn the house upside down. Look for your keys. Your wallet. People try to be helpful.

I left a commentary on the book of Genesis on the plane. I filled out the form and sent it to Delta. An agent called and said the book had been returned to Lost and Found at the Atlanta airport. Next time in Atlanta I went down to baggage and retrieved my lost book. Great relief. But the agent said, "The man who turned it in said, "I can't imagine why anyone would want this book." Well, I wanted it. I like commentaries.

Luke 15 turns out to be the Bible's lost and found department. A shepherd lost a sheep. That doesn't really reach us, does it? A woman lost a coin. If you spent your childhood digging under the cushions of the sofa looking for coins, you are a fan of lost coins. I stopped for gas at Stewart's and there was a quarter on the ground – a shiny quarter. There was a time when I would have picked up a penny, but I left the quarter for someone else afraid my back would go out if I bent over for that quarter. So, a woman losing 1 of 10 coins doesn't create much empathy for me.

Then, the story turns darker. A father lost a son. 460,000 missing children in USA every year. 2.5 million homeless children in the USA. But who cares about facts in the post-truth age where you get to make up your own propaganda and never verify? We call this the parable of the prodigal son, but it's a bad name. This is about the pain and agony of a father losing a son he loves with all his heart. The waiting father gives us a picture of God.

Sometimes I think we accumulate bad pictures of God. This puzzles me because the Bible has all these pictures of God – a veritable photograph album of God's goodness, mercy, love, and grace. How did a God so good get such a bad reputation? God doesn't have a bad side, but people have certainly gotten sideways with God. People blame God for heart attacks, tornadoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. But have you ever noticed when there's a disaster there are two groups that crawl out from under the rock to announce that this was the work and will of God? A certain kind of preacher, usually one with a definite Calvinist flavor of predestination will triumphantly insist that a disaster was part of God's plan. The other group is a motley crew of journalists, authors, and scholars who are lumped together as

atheists. Their howling has the most irony. Remember, by definition, an atheist doesn't believe in God, but when the hurricane strikes, the atheist says, "God did it." (David Bentley Hart).

I'm having none of it, and I encourage you to see through the delusions of the atheists. People determined to live without God have little to show for all their bravado at the end of the line: "a certain honor, or perhaps just a grim satisfaction, in facing up to the human condition without despair and without wishful thinking and without God." That's not much to go on is it? Our God is a good God, author of a good creation, and determined to bring about the maximum amount of goodness in the lives of all people. The waiting father pictures God's deep and abiding love, God's magnanimous forgiveness, and incredible generosity.

But the son can't be ignored. He is the primordial bad boy. Americans, have a crush on bad boys. "Breaking Bad." "The Sopranos." "The Godfather." Any man who can pull off the bad boy act gets a lot of love. We elected one president. We have a warm place in our heart for the most famous outlaws, crooks, and bank robbers in our history. Jesse James. Billy the Kid. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Dillinger. Bonnie and Clyde (ah, a bad girl). So, this bad boy wastes all his money. These outlaw entrepreneurs' "market" themselves to an adoring public as something more than outlaws – as strong and powerful men capable of sticking it to the Law and doing what has to be done. The public then lives out its own rebellion against the system in the acts and antics of the beloved outlaw.

Make no mistake the prodigal son was a bad boy. Then "he comes to himself." The prodigal son is the first "woke" person in history. He comes to himself. He decides to go home to his father and plead for mercy. We all know the story. Here's the rub. The story doesn't ring true today. Prodigals don't come home. They don't waste all their money in loose living. They have stock portfolios, corporate bonuses, big houses, and BMW's. Prodigals leave home, leave church, and they don't come back. A politician in Louisiana was running for governor and I was campaigning for him. In his stump speech, he would say, "I will never leave my church, my wife, or my party." Then after the election, he went to another church. Then he changed his political party from Democrat to Republican. I thought I should call and warn his wife because he was now 2 for 3. There's a story in Exodus of a slave

Remember Tony Soprano? Ultimate bad boy – northern New Jersey mafia boss. Soprano offers a vivid picture of American masculinity. "He was hulking and sweaty; he radiated a meaty, sweaty physicality, as if he were

made of the slices of deli-case gabbagool that he would stand in front of his fridge and shove into his mouth. He was brooding and dangerous. But he was also self-pitying and nostalgic. Tony was void of empathy and the pain of others. He surrounded himself with sycophants but convinced himself that their sucking up was genuine. He demanded loyalty but felt no obligation to return it. "This thing is a pyramid, since time immemorial," he told his captains, angry that they were not bringing in enough cash. 'Stuff runs downhill, money goes up.' Today's prodigals are winners. They brag and posture. They do as they please. They are not running home to daddy. The church has to rethink our story.

Charles Taylor says that the new secularism of our time is that belief in God is longer the default setting. Secular prodigals see no reason to return to home or church because they are convinced that they are flourishing. Taylor says that flourishing has become something that seems within the reach of masses of people and this flourishing is driven by an incessant materialism. Whereas the prodigal son in our story is defined by lack, today's prodigals are defined by affluence.

Let's face the reality that many Americans have decided that being a prodigal is as good as it gets. They are leaving the churches in large numbers; they have no desire to return. They don't feel they are lost. They are doing fine with a vague belief in God and no church.

I believe our nation is overrun with prodigal sons and daughters, bad boys and bad guys who have lost their way, who have purchased a fake flourishing that will not be enough to sustain them. They lack the strength to face what comes to everyone: "The grass withers, the flower fades."

I affirm that you can trust the waiting father to always be ready to host the banquet for a returning child. We can trust the maker of heaven and earth. God's purpose is peace and praise. This and this alone is God's agenda – to make a reconciled world, world in which diverse human communities come to share a life together because they share the conviction that God has acted to set them free from fear and guilt. This is what God is after; there is no hidden agenda, nothing is held back, God never tires of working to reclaim, renew, and revive us (Rowan Williams).

Maybe some of God's people have forgotten what God is like. You get a picture of God in the waiting father. This is how God acts, what God wants to become real in and for all of us. God doesn't want us arguing and fighting over who is and who is not a racist. God wants us living in a reconciled

society. Sometimes arguing is a thinly veiled attempt to ignore the gentle persuading call of God for us to change our ways.

At the heart of all the awful suffering in our world, all the terrible mistrust, there is an indestructible energy making for love. If we have grasped what God is about, we can trust that this lies at the foundation of everything.

Sometimes a child falls and skins a knee, runs crying to his mother (God is also the waiting mother). The mother picks up the child and says, "Let me kiss it and make it well," as if mother has magical powers. She kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap and all is well. The ten minutes in her lap make the child well. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying. "Mother, why are you crying? I'm the one who hurt my elbow." "Because you hurt," the mother says, "I hurt." What is the nature of God? When you hurt, God hurts. Every pain, every loss, every dark night of the soul in all the prodigal lives, causes God deep pain. I believe this with all my heart.

There's a native tribe in Central America. Christian missionaries carried the gospel to them. They translated the Bible into the native language, but the tribe had no word for love. So John 3:16 "For God so loved the world" became "For God so hurt in God's heart."

I must preach this because this is what all the artificial, material flourishing of our world can't provide: a patient, caring, healing mother who holds the hurt ones and a welcoming, waiting father who hurts when the child hurts. I have to preach this. I have to.

I trust, I have confidence in, I take refuge in the God who has no selfish purpose, who works patiently with all of us and waits just as patiently for us to come home. That's the nature of God. Will you help me share a word with the entire congregation? I want to say to all our members, those who haven't been in a few weeks as well as those who have been in twenty years or more: "Come home." The table is set. "Come home." Let us eat and celebrate. "Come home." The party has started. "Come home."