

Coming Home

Sterling UMC
March 14, 2010
Luke 15:11-32

Do you ever get tired of your day to day, average existence? I know I do. Well, I should say, "I did". Then I decided to do something about it. You see, conventional wisdom says that you live your life and then when you're older, your parents die and they give you whatever they have left over...an inheritance right? I'm sorry, but that was just not good enough for me. I mean, come on. Give me the money now so I can really enjoy it! What good is it when you're old and worn out? So I decided to do something about it. Here's what I did, I walked right up to my dad, looked him in the face and I said, "Dad, I want what's coming to me. Give me my portion of the inheritance, and give it to me now."

I am the younger of two sons in a world that certainly favors being first born. Did you know the first-born becomes the leader of the family, not because he has done anything to deserve it but simply because he happened to be born first. Those of us untimely born don't have a chance to use our talents and abilities. We simply are left out when it comes to succeeding our father as head of the house. And not only that, the first-born gets a double portion of the inheritance when my father's estate "matures."

Well I wasn't going to wait around for my portion. There was no future here for me. I wanted some adventure, I wanted to see the world, I wanted to do things my way, I wanted to show that I am worth something, that I have dreams and ideas, that I can succeed out there without my father or my older brother looking over my shoulder.

Well my demand seemed to grieve my father deeply, and though it was obvious how much it pained him, he gave me exactly what I asked for and let me go.

So I packed my bags and I was outta there! Kissed that boring place goodbye! I had places to go and people to see. I took my inheritance, walked out the door, marched down the road, shoulders held high, and set out to discover my future. Boy it felt good! Boy, was I excited. I wanted to get as far away from that place as I could. I headed for a distant place that I had heard of and that had never heard of me, I might add.

There was a whole world waiting for me to discover it. And guess what was the first thing I did? I got lost. I had to stop three times and ask directions. Finally I found my way out of town and then I began to live it up!

Oh yeah, I had it all! I had more friends than I knew what to do with, the best clothes money could buy, I was eating like a king, and the ladies...what can I say about the ladies? Okay, okay they may have been women, but come to think of it - none of them were ladies. But boy, did I have a good time. New friends. No rules. Party into the night. No older brother checking up on me. It doesn't get any better than that. Man it was

awesome! Until...until my money ran out right about the same time the whole country hit a recession. And then for some reason, my new friends also disappeared. I don't know where they went. But they sure left in a hurry!

So I was left to fend for myself. I tried to find a job. Man I tried...I really did, but I couldn't find anything. I searched and searched and finally I got a job. It was a managerial position. Well, not really a manager, an assistant manager. Well maybe not an assistant manager but an associate...okay, okay, I was a bacon preparation assistant.

Which means, I slopped hogs....It was bad. I had wasted everything that I had. I didn't have a place to live. I didn't have anything to eat. Every day I'd be feeding the pigs and I'd be looking at the stuff I was feeding them. And I would gladly have eaten it, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me. For a young Jewish lad it doesn't get much lower than that. So I lived in agony realizing that I had squandered my life. It was misery day after day after day after day.

I was at the very lowest point in my life. And desperate people sometimes take desperate measures. In my case, I had to take a realistic view of my situation, humble myself, and make one of the toughest decisions of my life. I "came to myself," that's a good way of putting it. I took a hard, honest look at where my decisions had brought me. And, I didn't like it one bit.

One day it hit me. I realized that my father's lowliest worker lived like a king compared to me. I mean they at least had a roof over their head and food to eat. So I wondered...Again and again I ran these thoughts through my head. What if I went back home? No, I couldn't do that. Father would never take me back, not in the state I'm in, not after what I've done, not after what I did to him. But I had no other choice, I was desperate, alone, and afraid.

So I made up my mind and I began my journey back home. I knew what I would do. I couldn't ask my dad to take me back as a son, but I would just go to him and say, "Look I don't want a handout but would you just take me back as a worker." Because maybe just maybe he would take me back as a worker. Just maybe.

I worked on my speech all the way back. I planned to go right up to my dad, head bowed, hat in hand, and tell him that I had sinned against God and him. I decided to tell him that I was no longer worthy to be called one of his sons - and I wasn't. I had denied every right to be considered a son of my father. I would simply ask - maybe beg - to be considered as one of his hired hands. So I continued on toward home.

Home. Ah that word means so much to me now. It means comfort and caring, understanding and acceptance and love. And suddenly I could not believe that I was just a few hundred yards away from it.

As I approached the house I could see him. He was sitting on the front porch. He looked in my direction. He squinted his eyes and he stood up. I knew that he knew it was me. And then I began to wonder what was going to happen. I mean what if he doesn't take me back? What if he just looks me in the face and says, "I told you so! I told you so!"

I knew this was a bad idea. Each step I took closer to the house, I knew I had made the wrong decision. And so I just stopped. I just stood there. I couldn't move. And then my father, my father, he jumped. My father literally jumped off the porch. I'd never seen him do anything like that before. It was as if he was this little kid who was just excited about something.

And then it hit me. He was excited about me. And do you know what he did next? He ran! And as he ran, I started to run. My heart was pounding in my chest. My father ran. He was running at me with his arms stretched out wide as if to say, "Welcome home! Welcome home!"

Tears were running down my face. As I got closer I could see that my father was crying. Tears of joy!

And you know what I did? I jumped. I literally jumped into his arms. I was so nervous, so scared, so I jumped. And do you know what my father did. He caught me and then he held me. He held me like only a father can.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." I just kept saying it over and over again. "I'm so sorry. Please have mercy on me. Please forgive me. I'm sorry I don't deserve to be called your son.

Then my father spoke. He said, "My son is home. Get him some clothes. Get him some shoes. Get him some new clothes. We're going to have a meal. No, we're going to have a celebration, a feast. For my son is no longer an orphan. All my hopes have come true. You see even though I had forgotten my father, my father had never forgotten me.

I guess it was hope that my father would have mercy on me, that he would take me back. The hope that somehow I could be forgiven. So I started to give my speech. "Father," I said, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."

"Forgiven!" He said. "It's all forgiven. I will never bring it up again. There is no shame. There is no guilt. There is no bitterness. And all that is left is pure joy. For my child was lost and now he's found."

My father had every reason not to love me, but he did. He could have thrown me off his place but he didn't. He knew who I was; he knew my failures and shortcomings; he knew how weak I was. But he opened his arms, he accepted me; he loved me; and he

rejoiced when I came home. Out in the far country I learned the meaning of misery, but back home I learned the meaning of mercy.

Friends that is what I am here to share with you today. You see the same thing that my father did for me, your Heavenly Father will do for you.

When you fail him; you reject him; you disappoint him, He is always ready to receive you back with open arms. I didn't have a long list of good deeds to defend myself. All I could do was confess my sins, my failures, my shortcomings, and my mistakes. All I could do was say that I was unworthy and ask to simply be a servant in my father's household. And all he did was love me and accept me fully and completely as his son. My sins were buried in the grave of forgiveness and cast into the sea of forgetfulness. And when you do the same thing, your Heavenly Father will do the same with you.

You may be a prodigal sitting here in this service this morning. You've turned your back on God. You've drifted away. You've rebelled against your Father's love. You've squandered the gifts your Father has given you. You may be like I was. Desperate. Alone. Bankrupt. Hungry. Afraid. Hurting.

If so, let me share with you some things I have learned from my experience:

Sin will always take you farther than you want to go.
Sin will always keep you longer than you want to stay.
And sin will always cost you more than you want to pay.

I know because I lived it. But I also know this:

No matter how far away you have gone, you can come back.
No matter how far out you have gone, you can come in.
No matter how far down you have gone, you can come up.
No matter how far you have strayed, you can come home.

When you do, just remember God will be waiting with open arms. Because when you come back to God, all you find is forgiveness.

Maybe today is the day that you need to take that step. Come home!
Maybe today is the day that you need to turn away from that destructive habit. Come home!
Maybe today is the day that you give up trying to live your life your own way. Come home!
Maybe today is the day you stop trying to carry that burden all by yourself. Come home!
Maybe today is the day you realize that you are not alone. Come home!
Maybe today is the day you face your fear with faith. Come home!

Come home! I guarantee you that if you will take that step you will see your Heavenly Father running to meet you with tears of joy and arms wide open ready to catch you, to hold you, and to say, "Welcome home, my child. Welcome home!"

Portions of this message adapted from the skit, "Lost and Found." © Skit Guys, Inc.