

I once saw a card that had a picture of a bear on the outside with the words, "The secret of happiness lies deep down within us. If we listen closely we can hear that voice calling out." Then on the inside were the words: "Send down a chocolate doughnut."

Ok, so chocolate doughnuts might not be the secret of happiness, but we all know the stirring in the stomach, even if it was a questionable motivation, was sufficient to turn the wasteful son of today's gospel reading back home. We all know the story of the bratty kid that was forced to wise up and come home. But maybe calling it the "parable of the prodigal son" causes us to miss the point.

The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke is the bible's lost and found department: It contains the story of a lost coin, a lost sheep and a lost boy but which boy was really lost? Jesus starts out saying a man had two sons. The younger son wants nothing to do with family responsibilities and he can't wait for his father to die so he asks for his share now. There was no law or custom among the Jews which entitled a son to a share of his father's wealth while the father is still alive. But there was a provision called a dismissal. A dishonorable son could be paid a portion of his future inheritance, but then [he would be] permanently cut off from the family. The child would be treated as if he were dead. No contact with the family would ever be allowed again. Requesting his share of his father's estate was a radical, disrespectful act by the younger boy. But the father's act was even more radical. Jesus says simply, "So [the father] divided his property between them." However much it hurt, the father respects his freedom.

In time, as kids sometimes do, he finally comes to his senses and heads home. And then something extraordinary happens. Luke says, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him . . .” Those listening to Jesus share this parable--both the religious leaders and the “sinners”--would have been flabbergasted by this father’s demonstration of grace toward his wayward son. For one thing, it was undignified for an elder man to lift up his robes and run. And yet **the father ran . . .** and he kissed the boy . . . and he had **his best robe** placed upon him as an indication of distinction . . . and **a ring** symbolizing his restored place in the household . . . and **sandals** representing his status as a free man because slaves did not wear shoes . . . and they had a feast. Can you put yourself in the place of that father welcoming home a lost child? Many families can.

I remember a Religious Ed teacher was reading this story to his class, clearly emphasizing the next part, the resentment the older brother expressed at the return of his brother. When he was finished telling the story, he asked the class, “Now who was really sad that the prodigal son had come home?” After a few minutes of silence, one little boy raised his hand and confidently stated, “The fatted calf.”

The little boy wasn’t the first person to miss a really important point in this story. Let’s step back outside with the older brother, still in need of a shower, arms folded across his chest, holding the moral high road. I feel that the heart of the story is in this last part—the elder brother.

Here's the background. One day Jesus, as was so often the case, was associating with publicans and sinners—the riff raft of the streets. And the religious people of the day were greatly troubled with the fact that Jesus spent so much time with all of these irresponsible people. Now, these good religious people could understand who Jesus was talking about when he told these stories about lost coin, a lost sheep, the lost boy. Obviously, he was talking about all of those sinful people he had been associating with. But then Jesus put the clincher on—he said **but there is someone else in the story**. And that someone else is the older brother. He never left the father's home and went to the far country. He stayed at home and did the right thing. Well, they knew who Jesus was talking about then. He was talking about them and their need for forgiveness.

It was scandalous for a Jewish father to welcome back the boy who should be shunned; it was more scandalous to imply that they –the elder brothers - were in need of that same forgiveness. Notice that Jesus didn't condemn the older brother; he was probably a hard working dependable sort of guy who attended the temple faithfully and kept all the laws. But the fact is even though he had lived home all these years he didn't really understand his father. He just didn't see why the father would want that worthless younger son of his back into the fold. He didn't understand that kind of love. He couldn't see how important it was to forgive. May worst of all he didn't see how much his Father loved him. In a world where God does not play fair, this parable forces us to make a choice. Who is the real "prodigal" here?

Who is the real "waster"? From the beginning Jesus says that this is a story about two brothers. Which one is the authentic prodigal? Which one has yet to come home to the Father's extravagant love? The message of Lent is that we have a Scandalous God. The scandal of such love, the scandal of such unconditional forgiveness, might be beyond our tolerance and might bring out our resentment. But God continues to scandalize us at every turn.

Every year a teacher would ask each of her students to pick a sentence from literature, name the author and source from which it came, and then explain why this sentence could be called the most important sentence ever written. You can probably guess there were political entries like "**All people are created equal.**" There were also a lot of literary phrases, like "**To be or not to be.**" There were fourteen entries of the same biblical verse, "**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,**" probably because the teacher had said that was her favorite verse.

You know what sentence won? It was not written by a famous author at all. It appeared on a postcard from Hawaii that one of these fifth grade girls received from her stepfather, who was on a honeymoon with the girl's mother. The teacher was uneasy about this, because the children were supposed to explain **why** this is the most important sentence ever written. But she let her speak. The girl said that until she received that postcard, she didn't know how her stepfather felt about her.

The girl's entry won the prize. It was written on the back of a postcard from Waikiki Beach. It said, "Charlotte, I love you."

That's the greatest sentence ever written. And there are many variations of it. And wherever it is heard, and from whatever source it comes, it constitutes a blessing. It is here in this text this morning. It's here in the parable of the Prodigal Son, and it's addressed to everyone. To sons and to daughters, to prodigals and to the righteous elder bothers: **"Come home. I love you."**