

## Coming Home

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 1998. Scripture lessons: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One of the biggest challenges in my life is to communicate who God really is. Tom Long says that if you can tell a story from every day life that says what God is like than tell a story. It's better to tell a story than to try to *explain* what God is like because God reveals who God is, not in syllogisms, but in everyday experience. So I'm telling you two stories.

My mother use to tell a story about her grandfather, Sumner Oaks, when he was a boy in Maine. One of his jobs was to take the cows to pasture every morning and bring them home in the evening. But one time he didn't show up in the evening with the cows. He was gone for a whole year. Nobody knew what happened to him. He boarded a ship and sailed around the world. A year later he came home in the evening bringing the cows in from the pasture. His mother was sitting on the front porch knitting. She looked up and saw her prodigal and without batting an eye simply said, "Sumner, it took you a long time." That's where my mother ended the story. Notice how different it is from the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. No running to greet her prodigal son. No shoes, no ring, and no robe for her prodigal son. No killing of the fatted calf. No celebration. No joy. Just the reserved New Englander asking what took her son so long to come home.

A lot of people see God like that. Reserved. Indifferent. God could care less whether or not we come home. Everything is up to us - we must somehow work our way back into his good graces. That's not the picture of God that Jesus gives us in the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, but it's a picture that a lot of us have. A cold, reserved, indifferent God who doesn't really seem to care if we come home. A lot of churches are like my great, great grandmother Oaks. We don't run out to greet returning prodigal sons and daughters. What kind of impression we give to men and women who want to come home to God? "Well, here we are. If you want to come, come but don't expect any of us to come looking for you."

But there's another story my mother used to tell. In 1909 my mother was nine years old living with her father and mother and nine brothers and sisters on a farm in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her brother, Ed, was 20 years old and still living at home. One day he decided to leave home and join the circus. He left home under the pretense of going to a football game and just never came back. He never told anybody what he was going. He never even sent a letter or card. Being the father of three sons, I can't imagine the worry my grandparents felt not knowing where he was or if he was even alive. He joined the Ringling Brothers circus where he charmed snakes so they were hypnotized and he would pick them up in his hands and he made belts out of snake skins. He was also an acrobat in the circus and he and an American Indian did what they called *The Slide For Life*. There was a wire 200 feet long fastened high to a pole on one end and sloped to the ground on the other. They'd fold their arms across their chests and slide by their teeth 200 feet down that wire. They had leather mouth pieces made to fit their mouths and they just bit on that mouth piece and slid down. One of my cousins still has the mouth piece. But when the circus season was over and returned to Florida for the winter Uncle Ed began to be in want. He went to a bar one night and someone sang a song, an old Appalachian folk song - "My Wandering Boy." It goes like this,

Out in the cold world and far away from home,  
Somebody's boy is wandering alone.  
No one to guide him or keep his footsteps right,  
Somebody's boy is homeless tonight.

Out in the hallway there stands a vacant chair,  
There are the shoes my darling used to wear.  
Empty is the cradle, the one he loved so well,  
Oh, how I miss him, no human tongue can tell.

*Bring back my boy, my wandering boy.  
Far, far away wherever he may be.  
Tell him his mother with faded cheeks and hair,  
In their old home is waiting him there.*

My Uncle Ed got to thinking of his mama and papa and how they must be worrying their heart out. He felt guilty. He felt ashamed. He broke down and bawled. He walked out and hoboed his way home to North Carolina. Ragged and dirty, he got home in January, on January

11, his twenty-first birthday. That night my mother's family celebrated. There were tears! There was joy in the house! Because "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The way my Uncle Ed was greeted that night reminds me of the way God greets us when we come home to him.

Northerners sometimes think of the Confederate States as a Prodigal Son. Once President Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and had returned to the Union of the United States. People expected that Lincoln would want to take vengeance but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." Lincoln had the heart of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. On April 9, 1865 General Robert E. Lee rode into Appomatox, Virginia to surrender to General Ulysses S. Grant. He was finally coming home and bringing the Confederate States with him. General Lee fully expected his men would be herded like cattle into railroad cars and taken to a Union prison. He expected to be tried and executed as a traitor. In the home where Lee and Grant met, Lee asked what the terms of surrender were. Grant told Lee, "Tell your men that they're free to take their horses and go home- and you, too, General Lee, your free to go home and create a new life." General Lee unsheathed his sword and ceremoniously handed it to General Grant, a symbol of his surrender. General Grant refused to take his sword. As General Lee mounted his horse, *Traveler*, Grant took off his hat and saluted his defeated enemy. General Lee came, like the prodigal son, expecting humiliation and he left with dignity and honor. Grant showed us something of the compassion and gracious heart of the father in the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

When I was young I identified with the prodigal son. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "All we like sheep have gone astray." All of us are prodigals. All of us need to come home. And so I came home to God at such a young age that I can't remember. And I was greeted by a loving heavenly father who came running out to me in the person of Jesus Christ. Maybe you too identify with the Prodigal Son. You need to come home to God. You need to return from the far country and return to Jesus Christ.

As I got older I began to see myself more like the older brother. I use to hear testimonies of men and women who had turned from a life of crime and sex and drugs and alcohol to Jesus Christ. But, like the elder brother, I sometimes felt resentful. I sometimes reacted with skepticism to their testimonies. Instead of reacting in joy I reacted in cynicism. Why do they get all the attention? I always went to church and read the Bible and nobody ever gave me a dinner and asked me to give my testimony. Many Christians are like the elder brother and it strikes at the heart of all our evangelism efforts. Elder brothers and sisters don't make very good evangelists.

As I have grown still older I see myself as the father. I worry about how much freedom to give my sons and how soon I should give it. I worry about their making the right use of their freedom. I pray for them to grow up to know and love Jesus. I stay up late waiting for them to come home. And I'm reminded that God, our heavenly father, loves and is concerned about us in the same way. What if each one of us had the heart of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son? What if each one of us had compassion, not only for our biological sons and daughters, but all God's children everywhere? Maybe the most radical statement Jesus ever made was, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." God's compassion not only shows me how willing God is to forgive us and offer us new life and happiness, but invites us to become like him and to show the same compassion to others as God shows to us.

Let us pray: We trust you God, whom Jesus called Abba Father. In sovereign love You created the world good and make everyone equally in your image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against You; we hide from You. Ignoring Your commandments, we violate Your image in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve Your condemnation. Yet You act with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, You chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, You delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, You make us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, You are faithful still. Amen.