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During this season of Lent, I've talked about our need to do the work of self-examination...to confess our shortcomings, ask for forgiveness, turn to God and then commit ourselves to a changed life. Our very liturgy shifts during this season to make repentance and forgiveness the center of our worship. Our Opening Acclamation calls us to bless the lord who forgives our sins. The Confession gets bumped to the beginning of the service from the middle. We sing the Kyrie which calls the Lord to have mercy upon us. And we use the color purple for vestments—the color of a penitential season.

But today, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, we get the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And it's as if the lectionary planners knew that to balance out all of the talk about our sinfulness this season, we need the gentle reminder that we find in this parable...the reminder that we can never, ever, be so lost or so sinful as to not be welcomed home.

This parable told by Jesus to the Pharisees and the crowds declares that in spite of all the ways our faith calls us to repentance and a changed life, God's love is never something that is earned. It is never something that we have to work to deserve. God's love for us is unwavering and boundless no matter what we do...on our best days...and on our worst days.

When we hear this parable with our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, we may not at first understand the magnitude of what it meant for the younger son to ask for his inheritance while his father was still alive and then to leave home upon receiving it. In today's culture where parents are often seen as overly indulgent, wanting to give our children every possible thing they ask for, we may have a hard time seeing how shocking the behavior of the younger son really was.

Many of us have recently been reading together, Henri Nouwen's *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. That book has taught me more about the context of this famous parable. The audience of Jesus, the listeners of this parable, Nouwen tells us in that book, were part of a very different culture. In Palestine at that time, honor and shame were the foundation of relationship. The inheritance promised to the younger son should have been at the disposal of the father, allowing him to live off of its proceeds, until his death. Taking it prematurely would have brought shame on the father and the entire family. So when the younger son demanded his property before the death of his father, he might as well have said to his father, "I cannot wait for you to die." Nouwen tells us, "[This] is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part." (36)

When the son leaves, he is making a drastic break with all he has known and has been—with the community and traditions that made him who he was. In that "distant country" to which he goes, he is seeking to define himself outside of the values of home.

How many of us at some point in our lives have left home for some other place, searching for ourselves outside of the constraints of home and family. I know that I have. And there's something thrilling and oftentimes even necessary in that separation, but we can also find ourselves untethered and lost when we stray too far from home, either figuratively or literally.

In Nouwen's study of this parable, he writes of the seductive voices that so many of us hear calling us away from home. Voices that say, "Go out and prove that you are worth something."

(40). He tells of Jesus at his baptism hearing the Father call him “Beloved” and then immediately being driven into the wilderness where he was tempted to prove his worth. The seductive voice of Satan promised him success, popularity and power if he would reject God and his place with God. (40).

Where and when have we heard those voices suggesting that our love and worth are dependent on something outside of ourselves and outside of home. That we have to work to gain acceptance and prove our value.

Nouwen suggests that in this parable, “[Leaving home] is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace, and that I am indeed carved in the palms of God’s hands and hidden in their shadows...Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one.”(37)

When the prodigal son returns home, not having found his worth or value or acceptance in that distant land, he has no hope for his father’s forgiveness. He returns assuming that he will be rejected as a son but may find a place as a hired hand.

But this parable makes clear to us that the figure of the father, representing as our opening hymn tells it, “the wideness in God’s mercy and the kindness in his justice,” receives the Son with open arms—with an embrace of love and welcome.

Upon returning home, the younger son discovers that home is the center of his being where he can hear the voice that says, “You are my beloved, on you my favor rests.” (37). There is no shame, only love and joy at the reunion.

But we cannot hear this parable without also considering the elder son. The richness of this parable is that it allows us to find ourselves in each of the characters. Not only does it give us the story of the younger son and reassure us that we are welcome home when we stray. It also tells of the elder son, and we can see that he, too, is searching for home, seeking the reassurance of his belovedness and his Father’s favor.

How many of us can identify with the attitude and behavior of the elder son...as much, if not more, than with the younger son? I have certainly felt before that feeling of judgement and that tug of resentment when I have worked hard to do everything right, to follow the rules, and then I see someone who has rejected the righteous way and made a mockery of following the rules seem to be rewarded with no consequences at all for their actions.

The elder son in this parable is surely meant to represent the Pharisees in the crowd watching Jesus closely and chastising him for eating with sinners, welcoming the outcast, and breaking the rules of the sabbath by healing the sick. How many of us can identify with the elder son and the Pharisees? We like the rules. We want to be rewarded for following them, and we want others to be punished for not.

In a way, the elder son is just as lost as the younger. And we are lost as well when we insist that God’s love be qualified by who deserves it and who does not. In order to actually arrive home, to surrender to God’s love, we must “let go of all comparison, all rivalry and all competition.”(81). Nouwen tells us that “this requires a leap of faith because [we] have little experience of non-comparing love and do not know the healing power of such a love.” (81)

But it is exactly that non-comparing kind of love, that love that brings with it such healing, that God calls us to and wants us to feel. There is always welcome for us to return home, whatever the reasons for our being lost. God, as represented by the Father in this parable, ran to the son who had physically been lost to him, clasped him in his arms, and kissed him. To the

elder son, he reassured, "You are with me always, and all I have is yours." May we, too, feel God's promise of that belovedness. May we, too, be found. Amen.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.