

“Coming Back Home Again”

- I. Introduction: Lost. Have you ever been lost? I don't mean the wrong turn in the road lost, but really lost? It can be mighty scary. I once was lost on my way to a job interview in Manhattan driving a rented Lincoln Continental in the South Bronx. I was very frightened. But that's a story for a different day. Next a question for the parents in the congregation. Have you ever experienced a situation where you thought one of your children was lost? Really lost? When someone we love deeply is lost, many of us become so fearful that we panic. Perhaps the father of the Prodigal Son felt that way about his son, who was away in a foreign land.

- II. Let me tell you a story about a time when one of our own children seemed lost. A number of years ago, we went on a family vacation to Fripp Island. Our daughter was entering her senior year of high school and had brought a friend with her. They were both very excited to get to the beach and, now being able to drive, they also felt eager to explore. Fripp is a beautiful island off the South Carolina coast. It is peaceful and not crowded, but there is not much for teenagers to do other than go to the beach and play Monopoly with their parents. So one afternoon our daughter, after considerable debate, convinced us to allow her and her friend to drive to Hilton Head where they would meet some high school friends that evening. Because they had to drive inland and then back onto Hilton Head, the trip would take about an hour and 45 minutes.

Our better judgment would have led us to say no, but we, particularly me, were worn down by repeated assurances that they would be home by ten or ten-thirty. So off they went. Ten o'clock came. Then 10:30, no daughter and no call. This was before cell phones. We started to worry, but tried to convince ourselves that we were being overprotective. Midnight, 12:30, 1:00, no daughter. We started to panic big time. We remembered the names of some of their friends from high school and found their Hilton Head phone number. We called there only to be told that that particular family had left earlier in the day. We had no way of contacting them. We began to fear the worst. We prayed together, we called the sheriff, and we called the hospitals. No accidents had been reported. We finally asked the sheriff to begin looking for them. It was then 2:00 a.m.

This experience is riveted in my mind. We felt helpless. A little before 3:00 a.m. we heard two cars drive up: in one was our daughter and her friend, and in the other, the sheriff, who had seen them driving home and had escorted them the rest of the way. We were very grateful to him because he spent a long time describing the dangers present at that time of night and gave them examples of what could have happened to them. There were tears, apologies, explanations. They were with friends, lost track of time, and started the trip home immediately when they realized how late it was. As I recall, our daughter was grounded for the rest of her life.

I tell this story because what I remember most vividly were the relief and joy that I felt when she arrived home. My worst fears had not materialized. Our daughter had been lost and now she was found.

- III. The Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel had also been lost and then found, and his father was overjoyed at his return, just as I had been. As we heard earlier, the Prodigal asked for his inheritance early, went off to another country, blew the money in wasteful living, almost starved, and came home out of desperation. The Prodigal's father was overjoyed to see him and welcomed him home with open arms.

Many believe that the story should really be entitled "The Forgiving Father." Here's why. This father was from the Orient. His son's actions had offended him deeply in front of his tightly knit community. For the Prodigal to even ask for his inheritance in the first place in this culture was viewed by those in the father's community as wishing for his father's death. In addition, meeting the son's request most likely required the sale of some of the father's land. To lose the family land brought great shame and violated deeply held Jewish practices. Then to squander that wealth in a foreign, Gentile land and wind up working with pigs was against Jewish law. His father had every right to be deeply angry with his son and to reject him, perhaps to have the Jewish ceremony of cutting off his son as if he were dead. Instead, what did the father do?

First he ran to meet him. Wealthy landowners did not run to meet anyone in the Middle East. They waited for others to come to them or they walked slowly. But this father ran to greet his son. As the story tells us, no excuse was necessary or even allowed. The father just welcomed him with unconditional love. However, there was a cost. In running to meet his son, most likely the father experienced a kind of humiliation in the eyes of others that could lower his own standing in his community. The father also threw a big banquet and gave his son his own best robe, paving the way for the Prodigal to re-enter the village community. Otherwise, it is likely that the community would have shunned the son and tried to drive him away. In these gestures, the father again made himself vulnerable within his community and ran the risk of damaging his relationship with his other son. Repeatedly, this father placed his son's needs before his own. His love for his son was unconditional, selfless, and freely given.

- IV. Jesus tells this story in order to emphasize the unimaginably powerful love that God our Father has for us. Just as those of us who are parents and grandparents want our children and grandchildren to know how much we love them, God our Father wants us to know how much He loves us. As our Father, God is grieved if and when we become lost and rejoices when we return to Him. Just like the Prodigal's father, God waits and watches for us to draw nearer to Him, to come home.

Our God is very patient. Although He has the power to control our decisions and our behavior, He does not do so. Instead He waits in readiness and He watches. I do believe that sometimes when we falter, God does reach out to us and protects us in very specific ways. But God does not yank us home or send out the sheriff's car to force us home. God is committed to our free will. We must give God someone to run out to and greet.

- V. Conclusion: My brothers and sister in Christ. It is my impression that we are coming home again at the Church of the Ascension. It is as if we have spent some time in a faraway place where we have struggled with who we are, what to do, and how to do it. We have decided to leave the recent past behind and have placed ourselves in God's hands. We are counting on God the father's enthusiastic and welcome embrace. Let's pause and savor this time together.

There are several reflections I'd like to share with you as a servant of God who has joined you on this phase in your journey:

- 1) As best we can, we need to leave the past and any feelings of being lost behind and not worry about the future. God is waiting for us at the gate to bless us and the nature of that blessing is for God to determine. We just need to show up.
- 2) Secondly, we can commit to this homecoming with unqualified excitement. Instead we keep our eyes on God and our hearts open to God's embrace.
- 3) We need to give ourselves up to God. The Prodigal son came home willing to do whatever needed to be done. We must offer up ourselves — our souls, our hearts, our minds, and our bodies to God in this place. God is working in wonderful ways in this parish. I deeply believe that God is providing us with an incredible opportunity to serve in his Kingdom.
- 4) We need to recognize that we are entering into a time of celebration, and, like the father of the Prodigal son, God has invited us all to this celebration. We celebrate 50 years of life at Ascension; we celebrate being together now; we celebrate what God is doing for and with us; and we celebrate the future.

You know the Father placed absolutely no conditions on the son as he welcomed him home. God is happy to see us here, and God loves us unconditionally in this place we call the Church of the Ascension. To quote Dame Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Thanks be to God.

