

## “Come Home, My Child”

- I. Introduction: While I was growing up, almost every day I passed one of the most beautiful homes in the city where I lived. A light was placed in all of the many, many windows. Every evening each light was turned on and burned throughout the night. Each morning the lights were turned off and then turned back on the next evening. The house seemed to be sitting a silent vigil each night, waiting for someone to come home. My father explained to me that, many years ago, the parents who owned this large home had had a terrible argument with one of their children – a daughter. She had left home in a rage and had never returned again. Her parents did not know where she was, but every night they lit the lights in the windows to invite her back home. To the best of my knowledge, she never returned. As long as the parents were living, the lights shone in their windows every night. Come home, my child. I miss you. I forgive you. Please come home to us.
  
- II. Jesus also told a story about a missing child – The Story of the Prodigal Son. It’s one of three stories in Luke 15 that Jesus told about yearning for or seeking that which was lost: first, the story of the lost sheep, then the lost coin, and lastly, the lost child. In all three stories, that which was lost was found, and much joyful celebration followed. You might have noticed a reproduction of Rembrandt’s famous painting of The Prodigal Son in the narthex this morning. In this painting, the son is kneeling before his father, tattered, beaten down, and ashamed. The Prodigal’s father stands before him, tenderly touching him with both hands, welcoming him home again. It is generally understood that the son has sinned; he has hurt his father deeply, and, after making a mess of his life, has come home in desperation to throw himself upon his father’s mercy. The Prodigal’s father has responded with deep compassion and accepted him back home, literally with no questions asked. The story of The Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the best-known parables in the New Testament.

III. I'd like for us to think about the story of The Prodigal Son in a slightly different way this morning. I invite us to think about this parable as an icon for the community known as Church of the Ascension. Several weeks ago, I was touring the lower level of the church looking at the repairs that are needed in our physical plant. I went into a room with a dirt floor and with what appears to be an ancient boiler. The room seemed medieval to me – dungeon-like. Up against the wall in that room was a large reproduction of Rembrandt's painting. It seemed buried there in a distant region of Ascension's memory. Sometime, somewhere, it had been used, but it had been stored away, out of sight. I brought it up into my office with a conviction that this picture deserved to see the light of day, that somehow it was associated with Ascension's future as well as Ascension's past. I couldn't explain it further at that time; I just knew that it needed to be brought up out of the basement.

During the recent weeks I have come to have a better grasp of why this story and this painting have re-emerged for us. We have a story to tell at this parish. It is our story. It is a story about generosity and grace. The God whom we worship is clearly depicted by the Prodigal's father. This God is a God of generosity and unconditional love. In so many parts of the world, of our nation and of our church there is currently a spirit of division and judgment. That which separates us has been allowed to define us. In contrast, what we aspire to offer here at Ascension is a safe place where God is not divisive and judging, but rather a forgiving, loving, and incredibly generous father.

IV. And it is God's generosity that, I believe, has moved us to a deeper generosity within our own parish. You see, our openness to God is changing us right now. On January 31, I preached a sermon asking you to consider reaching deeper into your pockets and pocket books to help us to repair several leaking roofs and to hire a youth minister. Some doubted whether the parish would respond sufficiently by March 1st, as requested by the Vestry. This morning I am deeply grateful to be able to report that you have been incredibly generous. We asked for \$120,000; 103 of you pledged \$146,000. Gifts of \$83,000 have already been received. You have responded generously from your hearts. You have tapped into God's generosity, the generosity the Prodigal's father showed his son.

My brothers and sisters, this is part of the story that Ascension has and must tell others. We worship a deeply generous God who is not far and distant from us. Our God knows all about us, our God knows our shortcomings, our God knows how we

have been hurt, and our God knows that often we do the very best we can, even through later we deeply wish that we had done better. Our God knows our hearts even before we say the words of confession. Just like the father of the Prodigal, our God wants us to come home. Our God does not wish to judge us, but to hold us in his arms; to be able to love us. This is the story we at Ascension need to continue to tell—God has been generous to us, God is continuing to stir generosity within our hearts, and God wants us to tell others about his generosity. God also wants us to understand that generosity received and not in turn passed on to others, can atrophy.

- V. But we also must remember that there are things that can interfere with the direct experience of God's generosity. Both sons -- the Prodigal and his older brother -- might never have fully received their father's deep love and generosity. The Prodigal needed to set shame aside and come home with the hope that he could and would be welcomed. Had he concluded that he was unforgivable, he might never have come home. How incredibly sad that would have been. The older brother is in danger of not experiencing his father's generosity as well. He could not comprehend that all that his father had would one day be his. His harsh judgment of his younger brother's disrespect and sinfulness was keeping him away from the joyful celebration. Judgment does this – it separates the judge from the one being condemned. This is also a part of our story. We do stand for God's moral law, and we commit ourselves to proclaim the Gospel, but we do so with humility. God alone has the prerogative to judge others. It is not ours to judge. We are to proclaim and live out the beauty of God's grace – God's undeserved love for us. This is at the heart of Ascension's story – God has been gracious and generous to us.

The depiction of Rembrandt's Prodigal Son belongs in a prominent place today. Due to our Father's grace, we are here to proclaim how much God loves us; how God constantly waits for us to come home, always leaving the lights on for us; and how God the father wants to teach us not to judge others, but rather to love and be generous with others and to tell the Gospel story. Our world needs to know about this God of radical love.

God's grace is changing our lives, changing our church, and can change the world around us. Tell the story of God's love and generosity to others in your life. Do not let them go through their lives thinking of God as a fearsome judge or a remote fuzzy force. Tell others that God calls us home, that God will throw his arms

around us, and that God will give us the power and the joy to overcome many disappointments, temptations, and failures in our lives. Come home, my child, says God, I am waiting for you. I have left the lights on for you. I forgive you, and I will always, always love you. *Amen.*