



March 8: It's Not Too Late to Be Forgiven | Luke 15:11-32

A young man, from a very rich family, had worked hard to graduate from college. And for months he had been admiring a beautiful sports car. One he knew his dad could easily afford.

He didn't have a great relationship with his dad, but he let his dad know he'd really like that car, that's all he wanted for graduation.

Graduation day comes and his dad calls him into his home office. The son is pretty excited. But it quickly turns to confusion as he is handed a beautifully wrapped gift box.

Inside is a big, lovely leather-bound Bible, with his name embossed in gold letters on the front.

The young man raises his voice in anger, **"With all your money all you give me is a Bible?"** and then he stormed off, leaving home, completely cutting off communication with his dad.

Years pass, the young man grows up, marries and was about to have family of his own. He came to a new understanding of his relationship with his dad and decided to reach out. Confident his dad would love to be a grandfather.

But before he could make arrangements, he received a call telling him his dad had passed away, and that he had received all his dad's possessions. But he needed to come home immediately and take care of things.

When he arrived at his dad's house, he was overcome by grief, sudden sadness and regret filled his heart. He began to search through his dad's important papers and stumbled upon the boxed Bible, just as he had left it years ago.

With tears, he opened the Bible and began to turn the pages. He noticed his dad had carefully underlined a verse, Matthew chapter 7, verse :11,

**"And if ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father which is in Heaven, give to those who ask Him?"**

And as he was reading, something fell out of the Bible. A car key had dropped out, with a tag with the date of his graduation, and the words PAID IN FULL.

For that young man, this discovery of his dad's love came too late. He had the car all along - but the relationship he had walked away from could never be reclaimed. It was too late for him to come home, to receive the forgiveness, love and acceptance of his dad.

Speaking of home, I have been at home a lot recently. I have been stopped in my tracks. And I'll be honest—fighting through the pain has not been easy. I have never experienced pain like this in my life.

But in the forced quiet, I've found myself turning toward God in a deeper way. It's like I am having my own "prodigal daughter" experience in coming to my senses and turning my heart towards God.

I have also had awakenings to my limits, of being human, needing and receiving help from others. Help to get groceries, rides to doctor's appointments, and even help to clean the litter box!

It has been a much more difficult journey than I have wanted, coming home to myself and my humanness. And in the middle of this struggle, through your prayers I am sure, I am experiencing how our Heavenly Father runs towards us the very moment we start moving in his direction.

Home and being home, is a universal longing for all of us. It is where we go to rest, heal, comfort ourselves and be comforted. Where we can pause, come to our senses, and turn our hearts towards God.

So "home" is much more than a house, or a place, more than your hometown where you grew up in. Our longing for home includes a shared yearning to fully belong, to be known and loved, to be forgiven, a place where we all want to experience peace and to be whole.

This theme of home, returning to the Father, is what makes today's story one of the great stories that deeply resonates with so many of us.

How it taps into the human yearning to belong, to be known and loved, to be whole. That's a yearning we sometimes have a hard time satisfying, even if our family are intact and our childhoods were pretty stable.

**"To feel as if you belong is one of the great triumphs of human existence"**, says the poet and philosopher David White. He says that to feel as if you belong, to sustain a life of belonging that continually draws and invites others in, is one of the great achievements of human existence.

But White goes on to say that it is interesting to think that our vulnerability, our sense of woundedness around not belonging, is one of our core common experiences as a human being.

For the crow is just itself, and the stone is just itself, and the mountain is just itself, and the cloud and the sky is just itself. We are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile. And that the ability to turn your face toward home is one of the great human endeavors.

It is one of the greatest of all human endeavors and opportunities, turning our hearts towards our loving Father. This same returning endeavor is what we find in this passage of scripture.

Today's parable from Luke is one of the best known parables of Jesus. We are all familiar with it. So, I was delighted to come across a resource by Carla Pratt Keyes, pastor of Ginter Park Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia.

She helped me notice something new in this parable. Specifically, how both sons feel a kind of exile from home, a kind of woundedness around not belonging.

One son is in a land far away, in a distant country. A real scoundrel and brat, who couldn't wait for his father to die to receive his inheritance.

The other son is right outside the house, in the fields. But he's laboring in vain as well, after something he hasn't yet been able to name.

And as much as the father wants them both to feel at home in his love, he can't force them. The father can only remain open, and be ready to offer it when and if the time comes.

The sons have to decide whether they will turn their faces away from their own dark and troubled thoughts, whether they'll embrace their vulnerability, embrace humility, and take those first few hard steps towards forgiveness and coming home.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter wrote a book called, The Book of Forgiving and it touches on the place of forgiveness in the choice both of the sons are offered.

With this parable we often focus on the father's forgiveness, rightly so.

It is the father's willingness to forgive his youngest son's vile behavior that enables the prodigal son to come home. And the father is waiting, ready to forgive his eldest son's sullen crabbiness.

It is interesting to note that this parable ends with the conversation between the father and eldest son. Highlighting this invitation is especially for those who stayed home and behaved. That it is ever available and needed by all. That it is not too late to receive forgiveness and return home.

**The thing about forgiveness is we all need it sometimes.**

That's how Desmond and his daughter begin their book. There have been times when each and every one of us has needed to be forgiven and to forgive. And there will be many times again to forgive and be forgiven. We are all broken and out of that brokenness we hurt ourselves and others.

Forgiveness is the journey we take towards healing the broken parts. It's how we become whole again. It is how we get home. It's how we turn our faces toward that elusive sense of belonging inside of ourselves and in all our relationship with others.

In Tute's book, they recommend healing begins with telling the story of your wound and naming the hurt you felt. It means really facing the pain.

Just like Lisa Cotter did.

Lisa had killed two girls in a car accident and was sent to prison.

"If I could stop time," she said "I would go back to that night and not drink and drive. But I can't. I have to live with the guilt and the shame every day in so many ways. I have to own what I've done in prison.

The only way to live with my guilt was to have structure. I ran miles and miles every day, around the track in the prison yard, every mile, I cried.

I cried for the two girls I'd killed. I cried for their parents' suffering.

I cried for my own children, whose mother had become a killer in the eyes of the community.

I also read spiritual books and 12 step workbooks. One workbook discussed the connection between healing and forgiving yourself. It said to look at yourself in the mirror every day and say, "**I love you.**"

So, every morning, I would stand in front of the small sink in the cell that I shared with five other women, and say, "**I love you, Lisa.**"

A cellmate of mine had been watching me do this every day, week after week, year after year, and one day she started clapping and said, "**You finally mean it.**"

I didn't even realize that for five years, I hadn't been able to look myself in the eye as I said those words. It wasn't too late for her.

Tutu's writes that forgiving yourself is one of the last steps. But I wonder, is it one of the first things the prodigal son had to do?

The forgiving of self, must be part of what happens when he comes to his senses. He finally realizes what he's done. How he has insulted his dad in the most grievous way possible. How he's forsaken his family, his homeland, his faith.

How he's failed to make it on his own, his dream of a life in some far away and exotic land had completely unraveled. The young man had to let himself feel what must have been a terrible disappointment and a monumental regret. He understood it and grieved it.

But then he let himself believe he could make a new start, that it wasn't too late for him. Not as the beloved son, maybe, but he could be a worker in his father's house, as someone who belonged there in some capacity anyway.

Desmond Tutu says that in his native language, one asks for forgiveness by saying, **“I ask for peace.”**

The prodigal son was determined to ask for peace from the person he had wronged, the person he knew could grant him both peace and a place to belong.

Now for the elder son.

The older son was furious when he came in from the fields and heard that his brother had come home and had been so lovingly received by their father. He lashed out about his slacker brother.

The elder son lashes out at his dad too, who was treating them unfairly. The elder son felt his dad had always been unfair. Because his father had never acknowledged his eldest son's hard work, slaving in those fields year after year.

I'm just guessing here, but I think this eldest son's anger must have stemmed from a whole lot of pain and the feeling that there was something profoundly wrong with the way his own life was unfolding.

Had he felt his own kind of wanderlust but suppressed it? Did he now resent what he felt was a requirement to stay home.

Did he imagine himself better than his brother, better than anyone in that house?

What did this eldest son need to let go and grieve in order to forgive his brother? His dad? Himself? The idea that people are defined by what they do? The conviction that his father was keeping score?

I suspect that such ideas had shaped this older son's choices for a long, long time leaving him looking from the outside in.

We are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile, to live with woundedness around the sense that we don't belong. But we are also able, because God makes us able, to acknowledge that woundedness, to feel it, to understand it, and to let it go.

Think now about your own vulnerabilities, your own woundedness.

What keeps you from feeling at home, yourself or anywhere?

Have you acted in ways that make it hard for you to look at yourself in the mirror?

What do you need to feel and to grieve and to let go in order to turn your face toward home?

In the end, we are not defined by what we've done for good or for ill or by what has happened to us.

Instead, we're defined by God's love for us. We're defined by God's decision to make peace with us and extend wholeness to us through Christ on the cross.

In our experience of forgiving self and others there is still hard work to do. But the hardest work, it's already been done, God has done it for us in the love and work of Christ.

So, we can turn our faces toward God and the peace and the wholeness God offers. By God's grace we can turn our faces toward home and forgiveness. And personally experience that it is not too late for us. Amen.