

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Coming Home

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Please pray with me;

Dear God, settle us together. Quiet any voice but yours. Send your spirit to stir our hearts and minds so that as we hear familiar stories, we find ourselves caught in your strong embrace. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable. Amen.

Hear this lyrical version of the Prodigal Son...

Well a poor boy took his father's bread
and started down the road...

Took all he had and started down the road
Goin' out in this world, where God only knows
And that'll be the way to get along

Well poor boy spent all he had, famine come in the land...

Spent all he had and famine come in the land
Said, "I believe I'll go and hire me to some man"
And that'll be the way I'll get along

Well, man said, "I'll give you a job for to feed my swine"...

"I'll give you a job for to feed my swine"
Boy stood there and hung his head and cried
'Cause that is no way to get along

Said, "I believe I'll ride, believe I'll go back home"..

"Believe I'll ride, believe I'll go back home"
"Or down the road as far as I can go"
And that'll be the way to get along

Well, father said, "See my son comin' home to me"
"Comin' home to me"
Father ran and fell down on his knees
Said, "Sing and praise, Lord have mercy on me"

Oh, poor boy stood there, hung his head and cried...
Poor boy stood and hung his head and cried
Said, "Father, will you look on me as a child?"

Well, father said, "Eldest son, kill the fatted calf"
"Call the family round"
"My son was lost, but now he is found"
"Cause that's the way for us to get along"¹

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son profiles a young man who leaves home, squanders his wealth, hits bottom, returns with shame, only to find his father racing towards him with grace.

This story from centuries ago echoes in the lyrics of the blues song I just read. If a collection of musicians ever knew a young man's hunger for worldly experience and the suffering of being addicted, it would be the Rolling Stones. Keith Richards insisted on including this cut of the "Prodigal Son" in their 1968 album, "Beggars Banquet" with Mick Jager on vocals, and Charlie Watts on drums. Knowing they sang this song gives new depth for me to their iconic "I Can't Get No Satisfaction."

¹YouTube, *The Rolling Stones - Prodigal Son* (Official Lyric Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=humDgJ-SmHI>

Another musician, Kid Rock, sings a version of the Prodigal Son that unmistakably imagines the son's descent, not into pig farming, but a lifestyle that enslaved him to drugs and sex. Among the profanity laden lyrics shines the clear plea:

“Please God, please I'll pay any cost,
If you'd just stop the world 'cause I want to get off”

If you'd rather another genre, rappers also sing of lustful desires that enslave only to want freedom. Operas as well.

Shakespeare riffed on the plot of the prodigal son in numerous plays.

One of my favorites interpretations comes from Willa Cather's 1896 short story, titled “Burglar's Christmas.” Set in Chicago on Christmas Eve, a way-ward son, reduced to starvation, attempts to steal enough to eat. In this first attempt, he fails as a thief, in the same manner as he has failed at everything - college, journalism, real estate, performing.

Driven by hunger, he breaks into a house to steal jewelry only to come face to face with his mother. Rather than let him flee again, she showers him grace, feeds him, and tucks him into warmth. He is finally home. Listen to the biblical illusions Cather weaves into the son's experience of grace ...

The old life, with all its bitterness and useless antagonism and ... its brief delights that were always tinged with fear and distrust and unfaith, that whole

miserable...futile, swindled world of Bohemia seemed immeasurably distant and far away, like a dream that is over and done. And as the (Christmas) chimes rang joyfully outside...he wondered if the Author of this sad little riddle of ours were not able to solve it after all, and if the Potter would not finally dispense his...justice...to his Things of Clay, which are made in his own patterns, weak or strong, for his own ends; and if some day we will not awaken and find that all evil is a dream, a mental distortion that will pass when the dawn shall break.²

As mysterious and as real as the resurrection, we cannot understand how God's grace confronts evil we bring upon ourselves, but it does. God dismisses it, washes us in love, and secures us in a home we could never imagine. Grace possesses the capacity to bring us home physically and emotionally and spiritually. It races towards us and invites us to change our hearts and minds about ourselves, each other, and God.

But Cather's story and songs, as with so many other retellings of Jesus' parable, stop short. Because of the parable's familiarity, it is often misunderstood, and at times twisted around its opposite. Emphasizing the extent of the younger son's "destitute living," we overlook the power of grace to open hearts locked in fierce righteousness.

² Willa Cather, "A Burglar's Christmas," in the public domain.

If we return to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' parable begins early in the fifteenth chapter, as the teachers of the law condemn him for welcoming and eating with sinners. It is for them and other others who listen that the parable of the Prodigal Son begins, "There was a man who had two sons." Listen for God's word as I read the conclusion.

Luke 15: 25-32

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. The slave replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then the older son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Jesus always steeps his parables with ambiguity that defy simple explanations.

To cut this story short, and only focus on the younger son, precludes the teachers of the law from being invited along with the sinners to come home to God.

It turns out, the older son also left the father, even though he never left home.

We can imagine his resentment when the father meets his younger brother's return with joy and not punishment: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command."

Rather than breaking the rules, he enslaved himself by all the rules that he imposed upon himself and others to be worthy of love. Sometimes those rules festered into anxiety and pain, becoming just as toxic as the younger son's addictions.

This older son bears the burden of striving for goodness, not unlike the teacher of the laws. He had to deliver. He couldn't make any mistakes with so many people watching. The family honor depends on him. The obsession to constantly score points of goodness enslaves, especially if you measure yourself on a daily basis against some unattainable standard.

That's how the older brother becomes just as lost. Lost in rules he placed upon himself. He cannot see that his father was

always there, wanting to celebrate with him, because he was too busy judging himself and others. That older son needs to come home just as much as the younger, only to come home demands that he drop all the rules and change his heart and mind to be open. Open to God and open to himself.

How often do we say to ourselves, “I can only experience God’s grace if ____.” Living in a transactional culture, it is easy for us to take on a mindset that we must produce or perform in some way, to be worthy of receiving anything.

The constant measuring fuels anxieties that get lived out in crippling ways. Dare I say, ways that enslave us. And, because our communities tend to be led by those skilled at making and interpreting the rules, it is very easy – very common – for these anxieties to separate us even more from those who love us the most.

The economy of love and grace offends with its extravagance. Every time God races to forgive, it does not mean less to go around, there is more.

We know this parable so very, very well. Perhaps too well. You might close your mind every time you hear it because you’ve never been welcome by either father or mother for who you are.

Or you are the younger child who watched another sibling blow up the family with dysfunction as everyone swept under the rug a mental illness or addiction trying to appear normal.

Or maybe this story brings tears to your eyes as a parent, who is desperate for a child to come home. So, you can forgive them, or they can forgive you.

Or death separated you from the possibilities in this earthly realm.

Know this. Through Jesus, God sees you.

Put aside older or younger son. Father or mother. It is just you and Jesus.

He meets you on the road. He races towards you, begs you to come home. Before you even need to think of repentance or any other requirement, he just wants you to feel God's embrace.

Coming home demands letting Jesus pour out God's love. So, let go of all the barrier that kept you from receiving it. Just let Jesus take you by the hand, bring you home, and feed you at his table.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org