

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022
“Coming Home” (Luke 15:11-32)

Once there was a man who had two sons. As happens with all children, the time came for these two sons to decide what to do with their lives. What course would they take into the future? The older son decided that the life he wanted was right there at his fingertips. As the older son, he stood to inherit most of his family’s estate. So, he would follow the tradition, do his duty and stay right there on the family farm. That was the road to a secure future. He would be a plowboy.

But the younger son decided that the life he wanted lay somewhere else, with somebody other than his family. So he did the unheard of and asked to receive his share of the father’s estate early. His father also did the unheard of, and divided his estate between his sons. The younger then quickly converted his share to cash to go out and see the world. He would become a playboy. Soon, the playboy was on the road to a faraway place. That’s where he would make his mark. That’s where he would find his future.

Well, it wasn’t long before his playboy lifestyle was replaced with the life of a peasant. He had lived too extravagantly and squandered all his resources. When a severe famine hit that faraway country, the playboy soon found himself bankrupt and hungry. The only job he could find was looking after a farmer’s pigs. Half-starved as he was, even the pigs’ food looked appetizing. But no one gave him anything. The playboy had reached the end of his rope. Looking after pigs and craving their food was about as shameful as it could get for a Jewish person.

Then one day, there in the pigsty, the playboy came to his senses. *Here I am starving*, he said, *when back at home, my father’s hired hands have more than enough to eat*. So he began to formulate a plan. He would turn back home, admit his failure, confess his sin, and ask his father for a job. He never expected his father to take him back as a son. He knew he had given up that privilege, but maybe his father would hire him. He could earn his living, while having food to eat and a roof over his head. So, he turned for home, prepared to receive the chastisement of his father, which he truly deserved.

But while the playboy was still far away from the house, his father saw him. Had he been waiting and watching all this time? Probably. When he caught a glimpse of his son, his heart filled with compassion. He hiked up his robe and ran to his son. It didn’t matter how silly he might have looked to the neighbors. When he reached his playboy son, the father threw his arms around him and kissed him. That was the first surprise. Then, just as the son began to utter words of repentance – to tell his father how he had sinned against heaven and him – his father surprised him again. His father interrupted his confession and exclaimed to the servants, *Quick, bring the best robe and put it on my son. Put our family ring on his finger and shoes on his feet*.

The son was speechless with astonishment. He had betrayed his father. He didn’t deserve such fine treatment. But the father wasn’t finished. *Kill the fatted calf*, he said. *We are going to eat and celebrate, for my son was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now he’s been found*. The household burst into activity and soon a joyous feast was underway. You can almost feel the playboy’s confusion, can’t you? Instead of berating him with *I told you so*, his father gave him a royal welcome.

That day, the son discovered how deep his father's love was for him. His life was far more precious to the father than being right or putting his son in his place – and certainly more precious than any estate. The playboy saw into his father's heart that day, and what he saw was pure, unconditional love.

Now, when the plowboy came from the field that evening, he too was surprised. When he smelled the barbecue and heard the dancing, he questioned one of the servants as to what was happening. When the servant explained that his brother was back home safe and sound and that his father was rejoicing and throwing a party, the plowboy was enraged. How insulting! How dare his father treat that irresponsible piece of trash that way! How dare his father treat him this way!

When he refused to go in, his father came out and tried to convince him to join the celebration. But he angrily exclaimed. *All these years I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed you, even once, and you never gave me a goat so I could party with my friends. Yet, when this son of yours – this no-good playboy, who wasted your property on prostitutes – comes back, you kill the fatted calf for him.* The plowboy seethed with anger and resentment. His scum brother was getting a free ride and it was absolutely not fair. What reward was there for following the rules? Why do your duty if the irresponsible ones are going to get what they don't deserve? He wanted justice, but his father had offered grace.

The plowboy just didn't get it. He didn't understand that his father's love was a given. He had lived all that time in his father's house and still hadn't seen the grace and mercy that was in his father's heart. Maybe it was because he was not at home either. Yes, he had stayed at home for his own selfish reasons – essentially to secure his future – but emotionally, he was as far from home as his brother had been physically.

What an amazing story, this parable of the prodigal son. But there is more to it than just the story of a runaway boy and a jealous brother. For each and every one of us, it is the story of our lives, as well.

Many of us are living out the life of the playboy. We want all the good experiences that come with the Father's house, but we want none of the responsibility. We don't want any kind of commitment that will cramp our style or prevent us from doing what we want to do. Perhaps we don't want the responsibility of serving on council, or being a member of one of the church's ministry teams. Maybe we don't want the burden of helping with the Mobile Café or volunteering for Meals on Wheels or Habitat for Humanity. Perhaps we'd rather spend our money on the many luxuries we could live without rather than supporting the Crisis Center or filling boxes for Operation Christmas Child. Maybe we'd rather spend our time doing things that bring us joy, pleasure and excitement, rather than spending an hour or so in Bible study or Sunday School, seeking to draw closer to God.

We are runaways who have distanced ourselves from God and have become lost. Like the playboy, we drift without direction or purpose. We are without God. And to be without God is to

live without forgiveness, peace, and hope. We live in despair, as the playboy did, when he found himself homeless and penniless.

An even larger portion of us is the plowboy. We parade a façade of faithfulness, but we lack depth. We go around doing the right things and performing the good deeds, but for all the wrong reasons. Maybe we do those good things simply because no one else will. Maybe we do them out of obligation, or even out of habit. Or perhaps we do them so that others will notice. But when we do those good things for the wrong reasons, there is no joy in our service. There is only resentment, anger, and the feeling that we are not appreciated.

We plowboys can be in church every Sunday, but still miss the gospel. We can be dutiful Christians all our lives, but still miss God's overwhelming love for us. Neither can we see or understand God's love for others whom we might consider to be the dregs of society. We are at home with God each and every day, enjoying our Father's constant love, but that good life becomes commonplace.

The plowboy in Jesus' parable sat at the family table every night and enjoyed the delicious delights of the Father until it became so ordinary that he recognized it no longer. Like the plowboy, it is easy for us to miss the ordinary because we are looking only for the spectacular. Our tendency is to see the Father's blessings at only the high points in our lives, while forgetting the millions of bite-sized blessings we enjoy each and every day.

This story of the playboy and the plowboy puts us in our places. But more importantly, like most parables Jesus told, this parable gives us a picture of God. The father in the story first shows us a God who loves us enough to let us go, but then welcomes us home in forgiveness when we return. It is also the story of a God who loves, cares, and provides for us every day. The father loved both of his sons more than anything. He wanted both to come into the house and sit with him at the banquet table. The father ran to meet his younger son and bring him into the house. Then, he went out to plead with the elder son and urged him to come. He stretched out his arms to both. That is exactly what our heavenly Father has done for us through Christ. In Christ Jesus, God has gone out to rescue all the lost – those lost in faraway places and those nearby.

The parable, then, is not really about the two sons. It is about God – our God – who loves us with gracious, unconditional, merciful, forgiving and tender love. It's about a God who loves us all – playboy and plowboy alike – not because we have earned it or deserve it, but because God wants to love us. No matter how far away we may wander, God will never stop loving us. And many of us have wandered far from home and, in our sinfulness, we are lost. Today, it's time to repent and turn toward home – home to the waiting arms of our heavenly Father, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Amen.