

TEXT: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

TOPIC: Jesus tells three stories of lostness, ending with prodigal family in response to Pharisee criticism.

SUBJECT: Casting Jesus as the prodigal, younger son moves the parable in a direction I think God desires.

TITLE: Making a Way Home

Do you remember the Alanis Morissette song “What if God was One of Us?”

To me, it’s one of those songs that can speak into a lot of contexts and today’s readings are some of those contexts, especially Luke 15.

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us

Just a stranger on the bus

Tryin' to make his way home

I’ll be up front with you here. When I felt led to develop this series, the parable of the prodigal family immediately popped into my head. That’s probably because it was one of the earliest passages I learned. When I was in sixth grade, my church class performed a musical called “Barbecue for Ben,” and it was about the prodigal family, so that might be one reason this passage became one of the most significant in the bible for me because there is so much you can take from it.

I never expected where it would take me this week, though.

What if Jesus is the younger son? I know. Mary and Joseph and all that, and Jesus was their firstborn but what if the term “younger” has a different meaning? What if the term younger refers to where Jesus was steering the reforms he sought within Judaism because his ideas of inclusion of the Gentiles was radically new to the Pharisees? What if “extravagant” living isn’t about throwing money around but exceeding what is reasonable or expected? What

if Jesus is the younger son because he was nomadic, so he had no home as we often define a home as a structure? As it says earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus had nowhere to lay his head.

Sometimes it's important to push back against overly familiar passages, so that's what I'm doing today.

If I'm going to ask the questions I asked earlier, I need to add some more because there are a lot of questions we can ask of this passage: What if what Jesus was doing was making a way home for himself and those who had been dismissed as "despicable" by the Pharisees and scribes? What if the way home Jesus was making was about being the first thing people look for in their hearts and their souls? What if the way home Jesus sought points us to God?

Luke 15 is set up by one very important point: The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Have you ever said that? I know I used to until I realized I live with the dis-ease of my addiction(s), and the dis-ease of my addiction(s) are sins. The problem with judging another is that it is often a comparison to yourself only in belittling someone else, you're saying you're not so good either, and that thought rarely crosses people's minds. Until I realized it is easy for me to slip, feeling overwhelmed by pain, grief, anger, and hopelessness, I am no different than anyone else. In fact I like to think I'm just like everyone else, so I kinda side with Billy Joel on this one because "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints."

Several years ago, there was an interesting study done with today's gospel reading in different contexts where people from the United States, Russia, and Africa were asked "why did the prodigal son end up where he did?" The answer from Russia: Famine. The answer from Africa? No one would help him. The answer from the United States? He squandered his living.

I share this because I believe it suggests understanding Jesus how Jesus saw himself, and how Jesus saw himself was as someone who was making a way home. Jesus understood that making the way home meant eating with tax collectors and sinners who were making their way home, as well. Jesus understood he would be labeled extravagant and that he would be in need but that happens when you're making your way home. Jesus understood he would have to be among the so-called "pigs," who would be welcomed home by the indignity of a Father running out to welcome them. After all, until people recognize they are afflicted, hurting, sinful, addicted, angry, and hopeless it's hard to realize how much the way home is a journey God has us all take. When people realize how Jesus helps them make their way home helped, I don't know whether they realize they didn't deserve the welcome home, but grace gave it to them in the form of a robe, a ring for their finger, shoes for their feet, and a huge party dining on a fattened calf even as offensive as it might seem, humble gratitude and joy result.

Offensive? Yes. To the "older" brother, who was privileged and powerful. You know the older brother. He's the one who stayed home and slaved away and never asked for even so much as a goat to have a party with his friends because he had no friends. The older brother was the Pharisees and scribes, who had their own way of doing things because it benefitted them and their interests. Running out to meet his younger son, the father offended the older brother because the son who stayed home lacked joy. The father's actions were offensive to the older brother who found the father's response irresponsible because the older brother didn't understand love and how love must be given away in order to be experienced.

Like God, the father wasn't concerned with morals, codes, and ethics, and that was probably offensive to the older son as well. Then again, is God concerned with rightness or

wrongness or is God interested more in the belovedness of all God's children, whether they've hit rock bottom and come to their senses or whether they're beligerent and upset. After all, as I read and then posted to Facebook this past week, "God isn't running the world; God is loving the world."

Something I believe Jesus' parable of the prodigal family tells us is that sometimes God comes to us appearing to be a sinner. Sometimes God comes to us as a prostitute. There times I know God came near to me when God was smelly and dirty. And God often comes as the person we are the most afraid to get to know, the addict and so forth because God stands ready to help us make a way home.

What really matters – and really changes our lives – is when people like you and I understand making a way home means involving ourselves with folks who are down and out. What really changes our lives as we make our way home is when we don't close our lives off to others because everyone is making their way home with Jesus, and just like you and I.

What really matters – and what changes the world one person at a time – is when we answer for ourselves whether or not we will join the celebration when those who we once considered dead are found alive, and those who have been lost, find themselves found.

What really matters isn't just talking about it; what makes a way home an experience worth experiencing is when the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling because like Jesus we intentionally choose to be among the "tax collectors and sinners" and find out what it's like when Love invites us to make a way home.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.