

'Coming Home'



Fourth Sunday in Lent
8:30 & 10:45 am, Sunday, March 6, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Psalm 32](#); [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#); [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The song hit the top of the charts in 1973. "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," performed by the musical group Tony Orlando and Dawn, told a story that has, in some ways, become an urban legend.

The lyrics describe someone heading home on a bus who has "done his time" in prison. He's hoping to find that the woman he loves still loves him, and he's written a letter ahead of his return, suggesting she leave him a sign: A yellow ribbon tied around the big old oak tree in town will let him know he is welcome. If there is no yellow ribbon, he'll just stay on the bus and keep going.

As the bus draws closer to town, the man tells his story to his fellow riders and even the bus driver. The man is afraid to look out the window, averts his eyes, but everyone else is drawn into the story and looking for him. At the end of the song, the bus riders erupt in cheers, and when he opens his eyes and dares to look, there are 100 yellow ribbons tied around that tree. Yes, he is comin' home.

Here is vintage Tony Orlando and Dawn from 1973—I'm pretty sure I played the 45 of this song on my record player countless times. Let's soak in the music and the story. **(Note to readers: Projected on our screens is the video recording of "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree" by Tony Orlando and Dawn. Use this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWn1Oj2V7Xw>)**

One hundred yellow ribbons—such a lavish squandering of money and material, going way above and beyond what the ex-convict asked. One yellow ribbon would have sufficed and made the point. One hundred yellow ribbons, however, made the point in such a manner that everyone on that bus knew not only was he welcomed home, but welcomed home with open, forgiving, loving arms.

We heard the story of the Prodigal Son today. I suggest we hear in it the story of a father who's tied 100 yellow ribbons round the ole oak tree out of an extravagance of forgiveness and love. I suggest we then hear in it the story of our gracious God.

We don't use the term "prodigal" much, do we? Perhaps some here aren't even certain what that word means. Quite simply, it means "spending money or resources freely

and recklessly, being wastefully extravagant.” And the Church has routinely called this parable that Jesus tells “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” At first, that appears to be the best title. After all, the younger son who asks for his share of the inheritance is absolutely reckless in his spending that inheritance. He squanders it in, as Luke terms it, “dissolute living”—immoral, self-indulgent behavior. He wastes that money on worthless things until it is all gone. He is left with nothing, and he is nothing. So, yes, “prodigal” is a good description of the son's behavior.

But there's a more accurate title for this parable. Jesus tells this story after some high, upstanding religious leaders grumble about how Jesus welcomes sinners and outcasts, how he even eats with them. Actually, Jesus tells two small parables first. He tells a story about a shepherd so concerned about his one lost sheep, he leaves his other 99 sheep to go off in search of it, hither and yon. He expends all this energy until he finds that one lost sheep. Then Jesus tells a story about a woman who has lost a coin somewhere in her house. She upends all the furniture and sweeps every corner, wasting the oil in her lamp to light those corners, until in the wee hours of the morning, she finds the lost coin. The titles of these 3 parables ought to be “The Parable...of the Prodigal Shepherd...the Prodigal Housewife...” and, finally, “The Parable of the Prodigal Father.”

This last parable Jesus tells is about a father who loves his foolish, wayward, sinful son so much, that when the son makes his way back, this father welcomes him home with open, forgiving, loving arms. This father is “prodigal”—certainly in the eyes of his older son, who believes his father has wasted his love and affection AND the fatted calf AND the robe and ring AND the celebrating, NOT to mention half the inheritance on the younger son who does not deserve it. This father is “prodigal” because he is reckless in that love (the older son might even call him “foolish”), when instead that love ought to be doled out carefully, love in measured doses to those who have earned it and deserve it. So the cliché goes and is lived out: As the twig is bent, the tree's inclined—just as surely as the younger son squandered that inheritance, his father squanders his love.

What the older, obedient, hard-working, somewhat judgmental older son doesn't recognize is his father squanders that same love on him. When the older son refuses to join the party inside the house, and stands outside having a hissy fit, the father doesn't ignore him, not caring about him, figuring he'll “get over it.” Instead, the father goes out himself to plead with him. Don't gloss over this part of the story. In a society where honor is everything, a respectable, upstanding father would not leave left the party to beg his older son to come back inside. That would be foolish, a waste of his time and energy, a squandering of his respectability and status. He would simply have sent a servant with a message. But the father, ever prodigal with his love, pleads face-to-face for his older son to join in the celebration, to come home. It turns out the prodigal father has hundreds of yellow ribbons at his disposal.

Will you and I finally see this parable our Lord tells for what it really is? An “urban legend” Jesus told 2000 years ago that speaks a great truth you and I need to hear. The God who formed us and gave us breath, and called us to be his people to participate in his abundant life simply won't give up on us.

No matter how far we stray...

no matter our recklessness and foolishness...

*no matter our wasting of the gifts God's given to us...
no matter our harsh self-critiques that lead us into self-loathing...
no matter our cruel judgments of others...
no matter what's going on in our lives right now, this very minute...
God wants us home with him.*

And so this God will squander his own self for the people he loves. One hundred yellow ribbons....or shall we say, Jesus?...affixed to a tree. Here at the cross is a giving of God's loving self that is absolutely prodigal. Excessive, extravagant, and beyond measure. It is to this cross that Jesus' parables in chapter 15 lead you and me. In order, ultimately, that we would be led home to God.

Today, like every day, we're comin' home. Today, like every day, we've done our time. And God is not just waiting for us. God, in Jesus, runs to meet us. **AMEN.**

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