



“Coming Home”

Fourth Sunday in Lent
5:30 pm Saturday, March 5, 2016
8:15 & 11:00 am Sunday, March 6, 2016
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

My wife and I the last few weeks have been trying to catch up with the movies that were nominated for best picture at the Oscars. So we've been watching a couple films before and a couple after the awards ceremony itself. There's one thing in particular that ties all of these Oscar worthy movies together. They have great stories behind them. There's plot and there's good characters and the director might execute them differently with direction and cinematography and all of the trappings that go along with making a movie. But you cannot get past the fact that they are just intriguing stories.

Today I have to admit that the parable of the Prodigal Son is one of my favorite stories from Jesus. And I think if somebody were going to make a movie of it, it would be Oscar worthy. It has all the elements that you would want in a great film. There's temptation of a younger brother, a son gone bad. He rejects his family and then he goes to a foreign land where he gets involved in some good old fashion sinning, and lots of it. We're talking PG13 here, maybe even R. Imagine what a director could do with that story. There are droughts and financial collapses, and there's the pain of him having to decide what does he do? Does he come home? Will he find rejection by his family?

Now for Luke the story actually begins at the beginning of the chapter 15. Jesus is talking about all sorts of things that are lost and then found and then celebrated; a lost coin, a lost sheep and now a lost son.

The son is disrespectful, no doubt about it. He goes to his living father and asks for his portion of his father's wealth. It's disrespectful because it is as if he went to his father and said to him, "I wish you were dead. Give me now, what will be mine when you're gone." He takes the property, it's probably sold and converted to cash, and then he decides to leave his family with whatever is left over. He just has to get out of there for whatever reason. It was shameful for the son to do what he did. But it is also shame-filled for the family that he has been left behind because now their property holdings have been greatly reduced and they are left with the shame of a son who has asked this of his father.

He goes to another country. He lives the wild life, he loses everything, and it gets to the point where he has to work with pigs. Don't forget this is a Jewish boy. Working with pigs is the lowest of the low. He would have been ritually impure and not been allowed to be a part of the religious community for his close contact with the hoofed animals. But finally he realizes that things have gone so bad that he decides that, you know what, maybe home isn't so bad after all. How many times has that happened? The parent finally gets to hear what every parent wants to hear, "Mom, Dad, you were right!" The younger son realizes his mistakes and he accepts his need for repentance. He accepts the reality that he is lost and he needs to come home. Notice though that the father doesn't track down the son. The son must want to come home, and to do that things have to get a little bad, and the son needs to experience some pain.

A number of years ago I did something really, really dumb. My son was a senior in high school and on the football team. We decided to go to the high school football field where he played and just throw the ball around and get him all ready for the season. The dumb thing that I did was, I gave him the football and said "Son, your dad was a great football player back in the day, and I want to show you how good of a football player I was. I want you to go ahead and make your best move and I will show you what a great tackler I was." So, he made his best move and I happened to look down just in time to see my knee bend a direction it wasn't meant to bend. Down I went, writhing in pain. The pain shot from my knee down all the way through to the tip of my toes and then decided to come back up through my leg up through my body to the very tips of my hair. My son, my beautiful son, walked over, stood over me and began to laugh. He thought I was joking. He thought this was all some game I was playing, I occasionally play jokes on my kids and that's what he thought it was.

After experiencing that pain, and then I had to go to rehab to avoid surgery, and I experienced more pain. But that pain was actually a gift, that pain was a gift of grace. Because I had to do the exercises that they wanted me to do to strengthen those muscles all around my knee to support the ligament that I had torn up. I had to go through the pain so that it could redeem my knee. I had to embrace the pain so that it could strengthen me in the end.

That's what the prodigal son has to do. The son recognizes his pain and knows that he has to now go home. I wonder what he was thinking when he was on that road? We know from Luke's gospel that he's coming up with his elevator speech for his father. He knows what he is going to say to his father when he sees him for the first time. He's going to ask his father just to treat him like one of his hired hand. He knows that he needs to repent before his father so that he can be, not restored as a son, but basically restored so that he can just get something to eat. And as he approaches the house, there he sees, off in the distance, his father, not walking, but running down the lane. He's embraced by his father, and then he's ready for his elevator speech and his father doesn't want to hear any of it, instead he calls the servants to go back into the house to give his son, symbols of restoration into his household. They bring to him a robe, and a ring, and sandals. The servants kill the fatted calf so that they can celebrate with family and neighbors that the son who was lost is now found. And notice what he offers him. The father says, "Bring him the best robe. Bring him the ring and sandals." Remember the son had taken everything that he owned so that he could get out of that place.

The father was offering **his** robe, **his** rings, **his** sandals, the best that he had to offer. He fully embraced his son and restored him.

A little while later the older son, the “good” son hears what’s going on and asks one of the servants and he’s told that it’s his younger brother who has come home. He refuses to join the celebration and once again the father leaves his home, not waiting for the son to come to him, but he goes to the son.

The older brother is so angry, he has seen this before with his younger brother. He has seen the disobedience, and the wayward behavior, the dissolute living, whatever that means, and turns it now into something even worse.

When he talks to his father, he says, “That son of yours.” Now we need to know that here “son” according to the older brother is not a term of endearment, it’s more like “son-of-a-gun” – only the word is not “gun.” But the father offers words of grace and love. “Son you are always with me and everything that I have is yours. But we have to celebrate, we have to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours has come home. He’s back to life. He was dead and now he is alive, he was lost and now he has been found and so we must rejoice.”

And then like a good Oscar worthy movie, we get the cliffhanger. What happens next? Luke doesn’t tell us. Does the older brother go with his father or does he refuse his father’s invitation and instead just keeps his grudge? We’re left to wonder. Like the movie that I talked about last week “*Castaway*” Tom Hanks is at a crossroad, he’s got a decision to make about what direction is he going to go? We’re left with that, which way will the brother go? Will he come home or will he walk away? Will he receive forgiveness or live in sin and brokenness? Will he go into the party to continue the celebration of his brother who was lost but is now found, or will he just let anger and resentment fester forever in his life?

What would you do? Well the fact is we’re faced with these situations all the time, aren’t we? I can’t tell you what to do. We all have our own paths to go, our own scripts to write. But we do have invitation from Jesus that through his word there is an invitation to greater relationship and opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation in our life. And know this, brothers and sisters, children of our heavenly Father, when we are far off God runs to us to embrace us with his love. When we find it hard to forgive, God invites us in to join in the celebration of restoration, reconciliation, and forgiveness. God’s invitation is clear to each one of us. Come home!

Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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