

**SERMON: March 14, 2010
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
“Remember Where You Came From”**

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

Today we take the fourth leg of our Lenten journey. As I have pointed out the last three Sundays, Lent is a journey with liturgical, scriptural, spiritual and communal dimensions. These four dimensions are woven together in our Lenten devotional: *From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*. This devotional itself is based on a book written by Henri J. M. Nouwen titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. At the heart of these Lenten reflections is the story that is told to us in our Gospel reading from Luke.

Thus far we have defined a journey as an intentional activity that takes us from one place to another. This can be a physical journey or a spiritual journey. Generally, this journey is from one place that is less desirable to one that is more desirable. We journey:

- From a place of fear to a place of love
- From the experience of brokenness towards one of wholeness
- From the experience of chaos to creation
- From Darkness to Light
- From the bondage to sin to the freedom of salvation
- From being lost to being found

But what if the journey we take does not move us towards a better experience? What if we consciously or unknowingly choose to take a journey along a path that takes us in the opposite direction?

What if we move towards fear, towards brokenness, towards chaos, towards darkness, towards sin? What if we lose ourselves along the way?

How can we find our way back again? What will serve as our compass that will guide our way home again? What will be the experience if we do find our way home again? These are just some of the questions that are behind the story that is told in our Gospel lesson for today, and behind today's theme: *Stay on the Right Path*.

It is a story that is familiar to us. A group of religious leaders come to Jesus concerned with the fact that Jesus is associating with tax collectors and sinners. No good and righteous Jew should even hang around such folks. They were legalistically and ritualistically unclean.

In response to their righteous indignation, Jesus tells them three stories, known as the parables about the lost. The first is about the lost sheep and the second about a lost coin. In these first two parables, the owner, when he or she

discovers that the object is lost, drops everything in order to find it. And when the object is found, there is the experience of joy.

Next comes the parable of the lost son. This time, the object is lost not by accident but by intent. A man has two sons and the younger son asks the father for his share of the inheritance with the intention of leaving home. For whatever, home is a lot less attractive to him that whatever he imagines is out there.

So the son undertakes a journey. But this journey is more than a change of scenery. This is a journey with physical, emotional and spiritual consequences. It is a journey towards darkness, brokenness, and chaos. The son quickly loses everything he has and finds himself working as an indentured servant. A life of comfort has turned into a life of dis-ease.

The only way out of this nightmare is to go home again. There is no reason for him to expect he would be welcomed back as a “son”. All he can hope for is that he can work as one of his father’s hired hands. So along the way home he practices the speech he will give, hoping to appeal to his father’s kindness. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

Who among us doesn’t know what that is like? You know that you have done something wrong, perhaps hurt someone you loved, or who loved you. You know that you have only one chance to say the right thing. So you practice those words over and over again.

So when the Father sees that his son has returned, he runs to greet him. The son says the words, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” He never gets the chance to finish his speech. For before he can say, “treat me like one of your hired his hands”, the father begins to set in motion his welcome-home party. This is better than the younger son could ever expect. This is good news.

But this is not good news for the older son. He cannot believe the events he sees unfolding before him. His greedy and wasteful brother, a son who has disgraced his father, his family and his community, now comes home as if he had never left. And now his father is going to throw a celebration?

I’ve been there before. Haven’t you? You work hard and play by the rules, hoping to get ahead and someone else comes along and takes it all away from you! It isn’t fair! It leaves you bitter. It leaves you wondering why you even tried at all. I think we can all relate in some way to this older son.

In this moment, no words can console him. All he can think of is what he has lost. He cannot see what the father sees: what was lost is now found. A relationship that was broken is now restored. This is an occasion for rejoicing.

So what can we learn from this story that we can take and apply to our lives today? We can ask ourselves; with which character in this parable do we most identify: the younger son; the older son; or the father?

There are many lessons contained in this parable. But the one I would like to lift up today is the power of reconciliation. And here I would like to bring the words of the Apostle Paul to this story. To the community in Corinth, Paul writes:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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Corinthians 5:17-21)

What Paul seems to be arguing here is that a new era of reconciliation has been brought into the world by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The world is reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. To be reconciled is to accept God's forgiveness in Christ. Through forgiveness relationship is restored. And as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we are entrusted the message and ministry of reconciliation.

In the story of the prodigal son, it is neither the actions of the younger son, nor the words that he speaks, that bring about reconciliation with the father. What allows their relationship to be reconciled and restored are the choices the father makes and the actions he takes toward his son. From the moment his son left, the father was longing for his son to come home again and willing to forgive him no matter what. And when his son does find his way home again, the relationship is restored.

Sadly, the older son cannot experience this moment of reconciliation. He now becomes the lost son; for he has begun his own journey into darkness, brokenness and chaos. Will he find his way home again? Will he forgive his brother and his father? Will he seek restored relationships? We do not know – it is a choice that is yet to be made.

Each person in this story makes a series of choices. The younger son makes a choice to take a journey that takes him away from home and back again. The father makes a choice to let his son go and to welcome him home again. The older son makes a choice to follow what he thinks is the right path, though for the wrong reasons. His choice is to stay home, hoping he will find favor in his father's eyes.

But clearly he is resentful of his younger brother from the moment he takes off. That resentment continues when the brother returns. It grows stronger when he sees the joy in his father's face. He will not be consoled by his father's words. Even as the father welcomes back one son who is lost and found and their relationship restored, he is now faced with the brokenness of another relationship. It is now his older son who is lost. We can be assured, however, that the father will be there, ready to welcome his lost older son back home.

When we are lost; when find ourselves living in the midst of a world of fear, brokenness, chaos, darkness, and sin; there is one who invites us to come home again. This journey home is made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is the compass that makes it possible for us to come home and to live lives reconciled to God and to each other.

Thanks be to God!
Amen.