

Sermon: Wanderlust
4 Lent, Year C
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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March 31, 2019

Today's passage from Luke's gospel speaks of two sons, one who stayed at home and one who thought there was something better out there that needed exploring. We could say he had wanderlust. One day the younger son makes a rude and presumptuous request to receive his early inheritance. The father obliges and things spiral downward from there. The text says he, "traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living." We don't hear the "dissolute" word used that often today. Here are some synonyms that can help bring it to life: decadent, intemperate, self-indulgent, rakish, licentious, promiscuous, lecherous, libertine, wanton, lustful, lewd, unchaste, loose, wild, unrestrained, fast-living, depraved, degenerate, corrupt, sinful, immoral, and drunken, to name a few – well, maybe more than a few.

Perhaps these synonyms give us a deeper understanding of just what the young man was up to! He blows through his cash in short order. He has gone hog wild and ends up in a pig pen, – sorry for the pun – feeding the pigs with food he wishes he could eat. In the depths of his great need, Jesus tells us, "he came to himself". Now while many of us might think that this great awakening comes to this prodigal son because he has seen the error of his ways, and it finally occurs to him that he has done a great wrong to his father, the great awakening actually seems to develop simply as a biological and economic issue. What seems to bring him to his senses is that he is hungry! And he has no money to buy food! This need, this hunger and lack of food help him to then consider the error of his ways. He has exhausted all of his financial resources. And we can imagine he's got time and space to think about all of these things as he feeds the pigs. No cell phone going off to distract him! No binge watching Netflix to divert his attention. Probably doesn't have enough money to drink his way into a psychological escape. And he has the added guilt of working for Gentiles as a swineherd, which would have been an added insult to his Jewish father. He is facing his own limitations and is coming up short. There has been a disconnect within the younger son, who he has become and who he truly is.

So what does he do as he "comes to himself" but head home. Humbled, perhaps afraid, aware of his sinfulness, he really doesn't know what to expect, but he is willing to take the risk. His return is met with a spectacular, over the top, welcome. The father RUNS to welcome his son home, puts his arms around him, and kisses him. Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish scholar of the New Testament, says that the common view that the father's generous response to the prodigal would be surprising to Jesus' Jewish audience is incorrect. She says that Jewish tradition sees fathers as loving their children and God as always reaching out to bring the sinner home. (Jewish Annotated New Testament, p.133) So this concept of a father welcoming home his prodigal child is not exactly a new concept. But perhaps the parable helps teach us what God's household looks like.

Even though it defies earthly rules and conventions, in God's family, God's household, we see that grace is at the heart of all values. Our concepts of fairness and righteousness are greatly upended in this parable. Much like the older son who isn't too thrilled that his wayward brother who'd been out squandering his inheritance gets rewarded in the end, don't we often think people should get their "just deserts". They make their bed and should lie in it. They should

suffer the consequences of their actions, right? We may be tempted at times to be like the elder brother, resentful that the father was so forgiving of the younger son. But then isn't the resentment itself something that drives the son away from the father? The elder son doesn't even need to leave the farm to distance himself from his father, to wander from the father's love. He, like the younger son has become something different than who he truly is called to be.

We can distance ourselves from God when we think we have no need for God. We can squander our inheritance when we think God's love is only for those who follow the rules. Wanderlust from God can appear in many forms, some that are very obvious and some that are so subtle that we can't even see them in ourselves. We are prone to wander, prone to go our own way, "prone to leave the God we love" as the great hymn goes. We sometimes run away from God's forgiveness, saying we aren't worthy of it. We resist the Lord's embrace. We often deny the healing welcome of God. And often we don't even know why. We just do it.

Recently in a sermon given at the National Cathedral, columnist Michael Gerson gave a profound account of his own personal story of an at times crippling experience of depression. I urge you to listen to it on PBS. Gerson had recently been hospitalized for this disease and shared that when he was "in his right mind" he knew that "love was at the heart of all things." I think his description of being in his "right mind" is similar to the prodigal's "coming to himself" and recognizing that to come to ourselves or to be in our right mind is to allow ourselves to experience the love of God, here and now.

What will it take for us to "come to ourselves?" To be in our "right mind?" To come home? To allow God to run to us, embrace us as we are, whether we have squandered our inheritance by living the way we'd rather others not even know about, dissolute, like the younger son, or are we hard-hearted, resentful creatures, like the elder son, or somewhere in between. As human beings we have an inclination toward wanderlust, in all of its variety of patterns.

To come home is to be found by God. Where ever we are, as we are, and let God help us be more of who we were created to be.

I'd like for us to take 3 minutes of silence to center ourselves in God, our eternal home. For these 3 minutes, can we just imagine being held by God? Knowing there is nothing we have *thought* that is beyond the realm of God's forgiveness, nothing we've *said* that is beyond the scope of God's restoring us to our right minds and nothing we have *done* or that has been done to us that is so awful that God won't run to us and hold us.

In your bulletin just below the line that says, "Sermon", you see the partial text of the *Come thou Fount* hymn we will sing at the end of today's service. If you know the tune, would you sing this section with me:

Prone to wonder, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love, take my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for the courts above.

Now let yourself be held, and be loved by God.
Amen.