



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

## *Coming Home*

**March 31, 2019**

**Text: Luke 15:1-3, 13-32**

### **Sermon:**

Names matter. What we call someone or something matters. In the early 1900's, when the Communist movement was gaining momentum, there was significant disagreement at a large gathering where many votes were taken. If the truth be told, those votes were split pretty evenly down the middle. Yet, one group came out of that conference calling themselves the Bolsheviks. Now, if you don't know Russian, think of the Bolshoi Theater, which means grand, big or bigger. The Bolsheviks came out claiming that they were the grander or bigger party. The other group was known as the Mensheviks. It doesn't sound nearly as good and it actually means smaller—diminutive—lesser. Can you imagine the outcome for those parties? Would you vote for the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks?

Then, later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, General Motors had this great idea for marketing this wonderful little car they had designed. It was economical and durable, and Latin America was an opening market. This car they had picked to send to Latin America had a great name. In English, that name meant the moment when a star burns brighter—when it flares up before going back to its original state. That name is Nova; however, in Latin America that name doesn't so much elicit ideas of stars. In Spanish it literally means “no go,” or “no run.” Surprisingly, very few people chose to buy a car that promised *not to run*. So what is the name of the parable we just heard this morning? It is the *Prodigal Son*. Names do matter.

But would you be shocked to know that nowhere in Luke's script does it call this story the Prodigal Son. We call it the Prodigal Son. Remember from last week how we talked about getting nervous about parables because we want to wrap them up nice and neat and tidy, and put them away, while taking away some teaching. But parables by definition are designed to break things open. So what does the word *prodigal* mean? Anyone want to take a bold guess? Yes, extravagant, wasteful—it means spending in a wasteful or extravagant way, and so prodigal focuses our story first of all on the younger son and then secondly it focuses on what he does, which is to run off and engage in all of that dissolute living.

Although we tend to focus on what he's done once he's left home, Henri Nouwen wants to turn our attention far earlier. In fact, he would rename this parable, focused on that first moment when this young man decided to leave. Oh, there is that insult in which implied in the son's request, "You know that money you were going to give me when you die? Why don't you just give it to me now?" Not exactly the nicest thing to say to Dad. And yet, in this instance, what does Dad do? Giving it all to him—not caring a whit about what the neighbors think, not caring at all except allowing his son to make this choice.

Then this young man can't wait to leave; he can't wait to get away from home. Maybe he's in search of great adventure, or finding himself, or seeking out the world but to go away. Nouwen doesn't think that the most painful part of this tale is wanting the inheritance, telling Dad in a way, "I kind of wish you were already dead, so give me the money so I can go and play." Nor does he consider the fact that this young man wants to get out and break some rules and live for a while, but instead it's the fact that this young man didn't feel like he already had a home. He had to somehow leave in order to find that home. Because home is where the heart is; home is where safety and security are.

We call this God's house—this sanctuary, because here we find light and life and truth and beauty. Home is where the doors are flung open and we are lovingly welcomed into *family*. And that is where we can hear the whisper of being the beloved and where we can shout out the grace and goodness of God. I wonder how this parable might be changed to be called instead, The Parable of the Son who Left? We might focus on this tragedy of going far and wide to look for a home when indeed we already have one. The tragedy that this world often induces us to do—to spend money lavishly on strangers in hopes that they might become friends or family, when they're all sitting right next to you. I want you to take a moment and look around in this room. Go ahead and look into the faces of people; go ahead and do it. These are people who, despite all odds, show up this morning to be your family and to dwell with you in your home.

Names matter. I wonder if we were to call this the Parable of the Son who Left, and yet, then again if we look at this parable, there is another child there. He is the older son of that father who was so generous. There was another child who *left home* and didn't come back. Not the younger one—the one who threw money to the wind—the prodigal one, but rather the older one. He was the one who stayed home and yet left the house every single day to go out into his father's fields to work, to supervise, and to do the things with which he was charged as the eldest of that time did. I have to imagine that in the earliest days when he went out, it must have felt so amazing to have such responsibility. There were new things to discover, new ways to use his talents, new responsibility. In the beginning, I bet he couldn't wait to get home and tell his dad everything that had happened. Most likely, returning home at night was the favorite part of every day.

I wonder when all of that somehow turned from joy and privilege to duty and obligation—when the daily tasks that once seemed so fresh and new and life giving ceased being new adventures every day and instead turned into measuring sticks to live up to. When the cloak of the oldest—that mantle that was placed upon his shoulders that he was overjoyed to pick up in the beginning—suddenly became a burden pressing in on all sides. For while

there is no question in this story that the younger son left home and got lost, there is no question that the older son did too.

Sometimes I wonder about those of us who are here on Sunday mornings and who have resisted the temptations of the world to show up in a place as high and holy as this—if it might not be tempting to want to focus on the prodigal son? I don't know about you, but I was a strait-laced little kid growing up. I never smoked a cigarette in my life. I didn't drink until I was twenty-one and everybody knew it. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like and whether it would have been better for me to have gotten out and shaken it up a little bit! Maybe I'll try that here. (Just kidding.)

But there is a temptation to be drawn to this story of the prodigal son for two reasons. One is the envy of those who find such joy in life even if it's headed in a dead end and wrong direction. But the second reason is that sometimes it makes us think, "Thank God I'm not him. Thank God I'm here, doing what I'm supposed to be doing." Despite the fact that this older son was the dutiful one and was content to wait for that future day when money would be his and he would own the property—in some ways he got lost far worse than the younger one did and it was much harder for him to find himself.

There are several phrases in this parable that we rarely notice; I want to look at them with you now. The first is this idea of the younger son coming home; Notice the phrase; it says, "When he came back to himself." That predates any planning, scheming or decision-making of that younger son to come home, for it was when he came back to himself—when he realized who he was—that he was the son of this wonderful, loving father—this Papa—as Jesus would call him. When he came back to himself, that's what sent him running home, and he had it all planned out. He was going to beg for forgiveness and then plead with his dad to treat him at least as well as the hired hands. But he never even got to apologize, right? This father that he left doesn't even give his son the chance to spit out the words, "I'm sorry." The father instead goes running to him, wraps his arms around him, and wants to celebrate with him—you're home. Welcome home! I love you. So the first phrase to remember today is—coming back to ourselves—and to the fullness of who we are.

The second phrase I want you to remember has to do with this older son. You may not have noticed but he didn't go into that party and I can imagine that what went through his head when he returned from the fields was the question, "Why is Dad throwing a party? I'm not even there. I'm doing all this work and I didn't even know about it." Then he comes across a servant who just happens to tell him, "Hey, good news! Your brother just returned!" But for the older brother that wasn't such great news. For him, it's all about doing the right thing. It's all about earning whatever you've got. It's all about playing into a role until those rewards finally come in. We're at risk for the same thing, showing up on Sunday morning. If we just show up, if we just do the right thing, if we just follow the rules, then good things will happen, instead of the reality that God invites us to a party every time we enter this place—for the goodness that abounds.

But what you may not have noticed is that while the elder son pouted, while he stood outside of that tent and refused to come in—that it wasn't just the father who ran to the younger son to forgive him; did you hear the word in this passage? The father actually leaves the party and comes outside to plead with that older son—the one who got all caught up in his roles and duties until they stopped being joys and instead turned into burdens. And he said to his son, “Let that go and come inside. Come in for we are celebrating now. All that I have is yours; all that I have is yours; enjoy it now.” When Jesus came, he proclaimed that the Kingdom had already drawn near. It's not something that we have to earn and wait for, but rather it's something that is here right now. What Henri Nouwen says about this passage is that he feels so bad for that older son because there is nothing the older son can do on his own to come into that party. Instead, there has to be a force bigger than him—greater than him—something that compels him to come forward. Nouwen would say that of the two things we need, the first is trust. The reason that we come to worship every week is to build that trust—to know that we have a loving God who welcomes us home, and the second is gratitude. It's to live not just in thanks for a party thrown but in gratitude that all of life itself is that banquet feast, waiting to unfold before us.

The Salt Project, a great new contemporary voice for Christianity, raised a critical question in their blog this week. They asked the question about the order of grace and forgiveness. So often we presume that it is through that act of forgiveness—of saying “Sorry” and being forgiven that grace abounds. But they stood that on its head, and it's compelling to think about. They claimed that in this story it is remembering that our God is a graceful God; our God is a loving God; our God is a Papa. Knowing that that grace exists invites us to be able to throw ourselves on the ground for mercy and find forgiveness that has already been extended. Since names matter, I wonder if instead this parable was named the “Parable of the Loving, Pleading, Running to Forgive Parent,” how might we read it a little bit differently? For the truth is—although we are all somewhat of the older and the younger brother, this parable invites us to be more like the father.

Yesterday I had a conversation with a wonderful woman who talked about how she named her child, because names matter. She named her child Luke, and I said that was a nice name. I asked her why she named him that. She said that Luke after all means “light-bringer” and I wanted my son to be a bearer of light in this world, but there's also some indication that Luke might have ties and come from the name “Lucifer.” Yes, that Lucifer. In the naming of her child, she wanted to acknowledge that that child would be both a human being with all of our foibles and our challenges and at the same time be a bearer of light. Friends, we are beloved children of God. We are saints and sinners at the same time. May this parable—may this story meet you where you are, but more importantly—may it remind you to simply come home. Come home to a loving God; come home to a loving family—whatever you do and wherever you are on life's journey. Friends, just come home.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*