

## Finding Home

Proper 20C: Luke 16.1-13

September 18, 2022

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When our daughter Kate was very small she hated opening presents on Christmas morning, because she loved opening presents on Christmas morning so much. That may sound like a Zen koan, which only the most insufferable sorts of Christian preachers resort to, but it's not. There was a very comprehensible logic to Kate's response. She simply realized that as soon as the presents were opened she would find herself in that moment when the next Christmas morning is farthest away.

It may sound like Constantine Cavafy was arguing against what Kate was feeling when he wrote, "As you set out for Ithaca/ hope your road is a long one." But I don't think he was.

Ithaca, you may recall, was the home of Odysseus. The island where his faithful Penelope waited twenty years for him to return from the Trojan War. Cavafy said we should hope the road home is a long one, because so many adventures, so many stories happen along that way. But embedded in his hope is the deep draw that home makes on our hearts, whatever or wherever you think your true home may be. We wouldn't have to be told to hope for a long road if we naturally wanted the road home to be a long one, would we? And could we survive the call of sirens or attack of a cyclops if we weren't longing so intensely to get home?

I like to think Cavafy was writing to little Kate, affirming her feeling of being so far away from next Christmas, which surely must be an archetype of home for a child, if not for every single one of us. But the old Greek poet was also counseling her gently that great adventures await her on the long road home to next Christmas.

Home. Maybe you missed the mention of it in our strange and difficult gospel reading for today. Maybe you're still squirming at the last line about not serving God and wealth, hoping the preacher will either explain it away or ignore it altogether. Especially since just a few weeks ago, and a couple of chapters back in Luke, we heard Jesus say that "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Oof. Sure feels like we're a long way from Christmas, doesn't it?

But did you notice that the strange parable about the manager who squandered his master's property was actually about the need we all have for a home? "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth," Jesus says, "so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." The energy that drives the parable is the manager's anxiety about finding himself homeless when his master discovers he hasn't been managing things very well, isn't it?

There's plenty to unpack just in what we read today, but I think something fuller emerges when we take a couple of steps back and see this story's context in Luke. Do you know what line immediately precedes today's reading? It's this one. "Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" That's the end of Luke 15, and chapter 16 begins, "Then Jesus said to the

disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.”

Chapter 15 ends with the only homecoming story that might be even better known than *The Odyssey*: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Or rather, as more than one interpreter says it should be titled, The Parable of the Forgiving Father.

What happens when we lay these two stories side by side, just as they come to us in Luke? Well, the first thing to say is that they both affirm a deep human longing for home. They both also affirm that we often find ourselves feeling very far from home, and sometimes it’s because of our own doings. We find ourselves caught, making destructive choices that alienate us from the ones who would love to love us. We cut ourselves off, whether in small ways with a sharp word or in the much deeper and more damaging ways that cause us to wonder whether there’s a viable road back home at all from where we find ourselves.

The story of the prodigal, of course, is really about two brothers, and the last line is spoken to the one who never wandered off, but who finds himself cut off from the celebration at hand because of his own resentments about the inherent unfairness of grace. You do realize that grace is not grace if it’s fair, don’t you? A world in which everyone gets precisely what they deserve is a world in which grace is entirely absent. It’s also a world that runs more like a factory than a homecoming banquet.

What the older brother shows us is that you can seem never to have left home at all, and find yourself even farther away from the father’s open, forgiving, welcoming arms than your wayward brother who was just yesterday envying the slop he’d just given to the pigs whose sty he was tending.

But back to today’s parable. It also explores the deep human need for home, even for someone who’s made a mess of his life. And, I know. You may be thinking, “Oh, good. He’s not going to say the gospel is about money after all.” But it is. It is about money. It’s very much about whom and what we serve, and the incompatibility of serving God and money. But serving God means one, simple, astonishing thing in this remarkable stretch of Luke’s gospel. Serving God means finding your true home in the arms of grace. In the offensively, patently, ridiculously unfair economy of grace, not the fastidious, ever calculating economy of wealth. Because, whether we believe it or not, our true home is a place where you never have to earn your keep.

Jesus does seem to say that even if you refuse to trust the foolishness of God’s economy, you’re still going to have to find a home somewhere, somehow. It’s a longing embedded too deeply in us to wish away. So, he says, if you’re going to live in the realm of money, go ahead and make friends for yourselves by means of your money. You’re going to need some kind of home. You’re going to need someone to welcome you when the going gets tough.

The hard truth, though, is that we really can’t live in both economies. And as long as I’m in a place, or in a state of mind, in which I have to prove myself, I’m far away from the economy of grace. Incidentally, I’m also far away from myself. Because, I don’t know about you, but when I’m asked to prove myself, I always have a hunch it’s someone else they really want. And so the self I set out to prove is a projection. The self I put forth is a false self I think the world wants instead of me. This is the definition of loneliness, is it not?

It’s the loneliness of the elder son, simmering in his resentments. It’s the loneliness Jesus doesn’t even want a grift and swindler to have to live in forever. At least use your ill-gotten gains to make a friend who might welcome you into her home, he says. Even that’s

better than the self righteous loneliness we're always just a few steps away from, even if it's just as true — much truer, actually — that we're always just a step away from the father's unconditionally opened arms as well.

Money is the measure of worth in this world. Add one small letter to worth and you have worthy, which is what every one of us needs something or someone to tell us that we are. This must be why Jesus said in all sorts of stories and parables and in blunt, uncompromising statements, that he never wants us to accept wealth as a measure of our worth. Never let your worth or your worthiness be measured in money.

Because you cannot serve God and wealth. I cannot serve God and wealth. Which is to say we cannot live simultaneously in the economy of performance and judgment and money, and the economy of grace and gift, where forgiveness and acceptance are not rewards for righteous living. Grace and gift are the very fuel for our broken down spirits in the midst of whatever mess we find ourselves in. And truthfully, I'm not sure it matters much whether that mess is mostly our own doing, or mostly the doing of a world that runs on the liquid nitrogen of that old human fear of not measuring up in the eyes of whoever we perceive our masters to be. The fear that if and when we do get home, we'll be asked what makes us think we're worthy of welcome.

Friends, if you take nothing else from this sermon, please take this: If you think that conditional welcome is what awaits you when you meet the One who made you, if you think God is just another performance evaluator, but on a cosmic scale, well, if Jesus is right, you're wrong. That's the heart of the Christian Good News. If you think God's moral economy is just an ultimate version of the money economy that distorts our imaginations all day every day of our lives, the best news I can pass along from these stories is that if Jesus is right, we're wrong about the nature of God. And we're wrong about our deepest selves as well. Every part of myself that I give over to be judged worthy or unworthy by the measures of this world, is a part of myself that refuses to make a home in the wide open arms of God's grace. "Why?" Jesus asks us. "Why do we keep letting our longing for home be coopted by the world of money and wealth and used to lead us away from the unconditional grace we were made to live securely within?"

There is a longing for home in every human heart that ever was. We need to come to terms with the truth that this longing won't go away. And, friends, this isn't just a matter of self help for our individual souls. The longing for home that's been shaped by a hopeless, violent, unjust world, will keep looking for a place where it will be accepted and affirmed, no matter how distorted and destructive the terms of acceptance in that false home may be.

But the invitation to each of us, and to all of us, is that Grace is real. And that Grace is who God is. And that if we make God's Grace the true north by which we travel, untold wonders and lifesaving encounters await us on the road toward the home our longings were truly made for.