

We Had to Celebrate
Luke 15
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Exile and homecoming: it is a common theme running throughout scripture, and not only is it a theological category, it is a reality of the human condition. German philosopher Martin Heidegger captured it succinctly when he said that we are all characterized by homesickness. In Jesus' parable of the two lost sons, the younger brother experiences homesickness when his sin results in being exiled from home. After disgracing his family and outraging his community, he takes the money and runs far, far away, and in doing so, he becomes an image of the entire human race.

Why is homesickness such a pervasive and tragic condition? Think about what home means to us and how strongly, even viscerally, we respond to notions of home. When we are truly home, we have a space that fits, that is suited to us, where we feel the freedom to be our most authentic selves. From the beginning, we were made for life in God's garden where we were to experience life in God's presence. That was the place that best suited us. It's where our deepest creative capacity could be satisfied; where our infinite need for love could be met; where the farthest reaches of our intellect could be exercised; where our desire for justice could be fully realized. God's presence, signified by the garden, was home. But we lost our home. We chafed because it wasn't our garden to do with as we pleased, and so we rebelled, becoming alienated from the Master Gardener. We left the deeply soul-satisfying paradise for which we were made and became wanderers: far from home, alone, hungry and in want. The truth is we are all prodigals. We know what it is to feel like "there's got to be more; I wasn't made for this." Like the younger brother, when we come to our senses, we realize we need to go home. But how? How do we find our way home again?

For starters we need to realize we're asking the wrong question. Think again about Jesus' three parables in Luke 15. A sheep is lost, and the shepherd abandons the rest of the flock to urgently go and find it. A coin is lost, and its owner turns the house upside down looking for it. A son is lost, and someone searches night and day, over hill and dale until he is found. Oops....wait a minute. That's not how the story goes! Something, or rather someone, is missing. Someone should have gone out searching for the lost son but didn't. Who should that have been?

That job rightfully fell to the eldest son. It was his job to keep the family together, to maintain family unity and status. That was part of the responsibility that came with receiving the lion's share of the family estate. A true elder brother would have said something like this: "Father, my younger brother has been a fool and now his life is in ruins. I will go and look for him and bring him home. And if the inheritance is gone, as I expect, I'll bring him back into the family at my own expense." Jesus, of course, doesn't put a brother like that into the story. Instead, the younger brother and the father have to deal with a resistant, recalcitrant, self-righteous elder brother. But, friends, we don't. Jesus has masterfully crafted his story so that we're looking for and longing for an elder brother who, if we go astray, won't hold our foolishness against us but will seek us and bring us back no matter the risk or cost to himself. And that is exactly the kind of elder brother we have. Jesus is the true elder brother—*our* true elder brother. He left home to look for us when we were lost and wandering as exiles. He came to seek and to save the lost, to find *us*, to put us on his shoulders and carry us home.

And what a homecoming! The centerpiece of Jesus' story is a feast. The father throws a party filled with music and dancing and the greatest delicacies, to mark the return of his son. He says that when the younger son came home, "we had to celebrate." It's as if there was no choice, as if marking this event with a celebration was a foregone conclusion. Why? Why is a feast in this context so important? It will help if we understand that in the OT meals accompanied all significant occasions. They were used to ratify covenants, celebrate victories, and mark all special family events and transitions—births, weddings, rites of passage and deaths. In the community's religious life, it was a feast that was established to mark the greatest event in the salvation history of God's people—the Passover.

In ancient times, meals were prolonged affairs that lasted all evening, usually until bedtime, and a feast celebrating a special event could last days, sometimes up to a week. But even on normal occasions, after a strenuous day of labor, the entire clan gathered together to eat, relax and converse about the day. These meals were the center of family life and therefore both a symbol and a practice of intimacy. To share a meal with someone signified acceptance and relationship which is why the religious leaders of Jesus' day forbade the religiously observant to eat with those deemed "sinners." To eat with someone was to receive him/her virtually as family. To the Pharisees' way of thinking, how could you accept and receive as family someone who has rejected God, as these sinners had obviously done based on their lifestyles? Besides that, didn't Jesus know that you become like the people you love and spend time with? If you eat with sinners, you'll become a sinner, was their reasoning.

The Jewish dietary laws were extremely elaborate and strict, which made them quite effective in keeping Jews separate from their gentile neighbors and therefore free from being polluted by pagan practices. Lest we become too critical, it is important to note that during the 400 years before Jesus, Judea had seen a revolving door of conquerors and occupiers. In order to maintain their religious and national identity, the Israelites' preoccupation with ritual purity increased, and meals more and more became boundary markers between the righteous and the heathen. So, it's understandable that Jesus' practice of eating with just about anybody—especially the wrong sorts of people—did more than raise a few eyebrows. This was subversive activity, and to claim he represented God in doing so—well, that was blatant heresy.

This eating business prompts the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus, and his response is a sequence of parables that end with a homecoming and a feast. Jesus, of course, has much more on his mind than whether the meal is kosher. Jesus is holding up a mirror, inviting us to see the truth about ourselves—that we are all lost but that we have in Jesus a true elder brother who leaves his home with God, wanders without a home on earth, and experiences the ultimate rejection and exile as he is crucified outside Jerusalem's city gate. On the cross he loses fellowship and communion with God. He is forsaken and cast out of the family—so we can be brought home and restored to the family. And when we get home, because Jesus has already absorbed the price of our return, we are ushered into a grand celebration. Everybody is invited to this feast—younger brothers, elder brothers, notorious sinners and outcasts, the religious, the haves, the have-nots, the nobodies and the somebodies. This is a table that is so lavish, so overflowing, that there is plenty for all.

The feast in this parable is a foretaste of God's eternal banquet table. By taking us into the feast now, Jesus is promising us that we will one day be restored to our real home. Our exile will end when we are back in God's presence, serving God's kingdom. There is coming a new heaven and a new earth, when this world will be made whole, and home will be fully and finally restored for all people. Then, as it was in our first home, there will be no sorrow, no death; no tears, no suffering; there will be only bodies that run and never grow weary. When we get there, we will shout with Jewel the Unicorn who said at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia: "I've come home at last! I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it."

When we come to the Lord's Table, as we do today, we come home. Here we are reunited with Christ, because Christ is already here, present at this table, in

this meal. This is a moment of great intimacy with our Lord, when we look to him as our true elder brother, as the one who came looking for us when we were lost and who provided our salvation and the way home.

We are also reunited with one another as siblings in Christ. The Lord's Supper is, by its very nature, communal. This is where we gather as family to learn together, to confess our sins together, to share life together. So, of course, when we come to this table, we serve each other. We come as equals. All of us lost. All of us found by a loving elder brother who was willing to do whatever it took to bring us home.

Each week of this sermon series we've asked how our experience of God's grace forms us into a unique kind of human community. At its most basic, we cannot show the world who Jesus is apart from community. We were made to live with God together, not each in our own individual spiritual silos. When we come to this table, we are making a bold claim and a commitment to one another that we are part of the same family, Christ's family. We are acknowledging together that it is only because of our true elder brother that any of us are here at all.

We don't deserve it. The younger brother in Jesus' parable did not expect to be brought back into the family. Because he had sinned, because of his self-induced exile, a feast was the last thing he expected. But that is what he gets. His father makes sure of that. The younger brother had come to his senses, recognized his lostness, and in contrition, he returns home and gratefully and joyfully enters his father's celebration. The elder brother, also lost but blind to his lostness, stands outside the door, refusing to receive what is being gladly and freely offered to him.

Our true elder brother is already seated at the banquet table saying, come in; come, eat with me. In this meal your body will get what it needs: the pleasure and nourishment of food and drink and rest. Your heart will get what it needs as well—friendship, community, a sense of belonging to one another and to Jesus our brother. He asks us to remember him at this table, for when we remember him, we remember our true home. When we eat with him now, we dine in anticipation of the eternal feast of salvation. Christ our true brother has made everything ready for us. All that's left to do now is to come home and celebrate.