

is spend money, eventually you will run out. In a sense he becomes a non-person, cut off from family, country and faith.

Did you run away from home or church for a time? Did you come back? What brought you back? If you have not come back, what would it take for you to come back?

Eventually the son starts thinking about home and how the servants on his father's estate are better off than he is slopping the hogs. The story says, he must "come to his senses." Sometimes you just have to hit bottom before you can look up. There are folks and churches who are just not hungry enough to really turn to God. For many of us sooner or later, famine comes to our lives. It may be a death, an illness, a child leaving for college, a major birthday, or whatever. We realize how empty our lives are without a spiritual home. We need spiritual companions to help us and lift us up in our time of need. We need prayer partners and fellowship friends. We need a place of service so that we have the assurance we are serving God in God's house.

Thinking about home the son realizes he must get out of his self-made mess. How many of us wallow in our self-made messes? It is so easy to blame others or outside forces for our predicaments and we have been encouraged in recent decades to do just that; what with the growing expectation that we should live in a no-fault, no-risk society. Yet with some foresight, some planning, a little reasonableness and faith in God's ability, we could probably avoid most messes we find ourselves in. We too could come to our senses.

So this prodigal son swallows his ego, his pride, and (I would think) his shame, and resolves to go home. On the way, he rehearses his lines: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Luke 15:18 NIV). And there lies the key.

Reconciliation Requires Repentance

Fortunately the boy in this story is astute enough to realize that if he is to have a chance of reconciling with his father he better admit his errors and turn away from his destructive lifestyle. Maybe the boy hasn't found great moral insight or altruism, but he's at least turned around and knows which direction he needs to go. We can point our feet towards the pigpen, or we can point our feet towards our true home with God. That's our choice. That's the meaning of repentance. This is an important point.

A lot of folks today tend to ignore repentance, after all isn't God so loving that he'll always take us back? Well, here's a word from Jesus – who was God among us – saying that God wants to take us back, but on his terms, not ours. We need to come to God and ask to be taken back. If the kid had called up and said, "Dad, I've run out of money; can you send some more?" I think Dad would have replied, "Son, I love you and so I already gave you all I had."

As the boy makes his way up the driveway we don't know if he's truly sorry

for breaking his dad's heart – maybe he's only thinking about getting three meals a day and a place to sleep. Maybe he's rehearsing his line, "Father, I have sinned against you and . . ." thinking that he'll soften up the old man. Maybe as he crested the hill to view his father's estate he was saying, "There's no place like home." Home – a place of peace and security, but will there be acceptance?

What do you think that kind of son would deserve from his father? What do you think we deserve from our Heavenly Father?

Look at the father in this story: he doesn't do like any other father under heaven would do. He sees his son first and runs down the driveway (absolutely contrary to custom) to embrace him before he can utter a word. He doesn't even say, "I told you so" or "I certainly hope you've learned your lesson" or "You better settle down now and make this up to your mother." On the contrary, the father breaks out the food and drinks, calls the neighbors over and says let's celebrate - my son has returned! And his neighbors are thinking, "He must be kidding. Why is this guy *wasting* so much on his worthless son?" What would you do?

For most parents, children leaving home is traumatic even under the best of circumstances. It's a nightmare when they disappear or run away. They pray harder. They wonder what they could have said or done differently. In the movie *Jumanji*, the father spent everything he had looking for his lost son. Is it so difficult to sympathize with the father in Jesus' parable? Don't you think that all the time the son has been gone, the father has watched for his return? In spite of everything this son has done to hurt his parents and disrupt his home, he is always part of the family. The ring and sandals and robe that dad puts on the kid are all symbols of being reclaimed into the family again. Forgiveness is not pronounced, but performed. The boy is reconciled to his father because he repented and his father acted to forgive him.

[A couple of thoughts on reconciliation: True reconciliation requires a "power exchange." The son had to give up his power and recognize his Father's. Reconciliation is best achieved "one-on-one." "Don't confuse fellowship with reconciliation." Just hanging around his father's house wouldn't have done it. He needed to express his regrets and apologies to his father for reconciliation to be real.]

All of us at some point, have taken the precious inheritance of the life God gave us and have squandered it. Maybe we didn't all waste our lives and bodies in riotous, sinful living - like drinking, drugs, immoral sex, dishonesty, greed, and so on. But perhaps we destroyed precious spiritual capital through gossip, resentment, anger, envy, pride, and selfishness. When we engage in any ungodly behavior, we wallow with the pigs, at least in the spiritual sense. If we would come home to God, we must confess our sin and repent. It is a gift when we come to our senses and realize that servants of God fare far better than nobles under Satan.

[In 2 Corinthians (5:16-21) St. Paul announces that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. For our sakes God made Jesus to be sin, though he knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. With this kind of offer we sure don't want to miss being reconciled to God. The only question is whether we will swallow our pride and our ego; be man or woman enough to to ask God forgiveness of our sins.]

Whose Son/Daughter Are You?

Now this could be the end of the story, "...and they lived happily ever after." But there's more. The prodigal son had a brother; an older brother. He's the firstborn son – dutiful, reliable, concientious. This elder son hears all the commotion and when he finds out the cause, he's angry. He feels slighted. Wouldn't you? He's the one who's always been plugging away, never asking anything in return, and now, as he says, "this son of yours" shows up and you throw him a party. Have you ever felt like that? Why the big celebration for the one so late to come to the Lord and find salvation? Why couldn't they do it long ago like we did? Hey, I've been serving this church selflessly all my life? I've been a member for forty years, why should these newcomers have a say?

The Scribes and Pharisees mentioned at the beginning of this story were upset that Jesus gave so much attention to people who obviously lived sinful lifestyles. *They* had made the effort and sacrifice to live in conformity to God's law; so why didn't they get credit for it? The point is: maybe the elder son was always with his father outwardly, but was he there inwardly? Was he his father's son in the truest sense? Or was he acting like a hired hand? Whose son or daughter are you?

I'm sure God appreciates people who do good. But before that, God wants to love you and me like family; God wants a relationship with us that isn't about keeping score, but about mutual love and communication. If the truth were told, all of us, at some point in our lives, were like that younger son; we had to come to our senses, come home to our true Father in heaven, accept the Lord as lord of our life. So when we get the kind of attitude held by the older son; you know, "I've got it coming, I deserve better..." when we get that kind of attitude into our hearts we're like the elder son and what Mark Twain would call "a good man in the worst sense of the word."

All that his father owns could be his for the asking. But of course, he never thought to ask because he was too busy trying to earn it all. And the funny thing in this whole uncomfortable situation, the really astounding thing, is that the father goes out to meet him too! Father steps into the dark, out the back door, and pleads with his son to just come in and have a good time. For his brother was dead and is now raised. The father's graciousness invites both sons to come to him and be glad, receiving forgiveness for the guilt of their sins.

Let God Be God

Jesus often said "blessed is he who takes no offense at me." In the end, the gospel really is good news. It's bad news first, of course: we *are* sinners, in need of repentance. But God *is* a prodigal, lavishing love and forgiveness on sinners who repent. Blessed are they who aren't offended that no one gets what they deserve; but what God wishes to give.

There is still more room in God's house, and so many who still haven't heard that they belong in God's family. Our challenge is to refresh our faith so that we're equipped to welcome those people; those professing faith for the first time, or coming back to faith. Believe me, it's worth celebrating when one who once was lost, is finally found, and comes home to God.

It's equally worth celebrating this central message of Lent; of today: "You are always with me and all that is mine is yours." - God's steadfast love for the faithful. God is free to love the solid, hang-in-there, obedient ones and keep loving even when they think they can earn God's favor. God is also free to love the wayward ones and rejoice over the return of one lost. So let God be God.

God is free to love us not as we deserve, but as God chooses: lavishly, prodigally. *We* are always free to repent, turn to God, and accept that kind of love.