

Lent4, Year C – March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Epiphany, Winnipeg

First, a quick note or two about this really familiar story. Things it's easy to miss.

The father says that he'll give his youngest his share of the inheritance, but then goes one step further and divides everything between his two sons. So now he's got nothing. He divides his life, everything he has to live on, between his two sons.

He sort of makes himself poor.

After a long time away the youngest son comes home with his tail between his legs and says, "I'm sorry, dad, for the ways I've sinned against you and against heaven...."

And then his dad says, "We're having a party because you were lost and you're found, you were dead but now you're alive!" Did you notice? He never says anything like "Now, son, you go think about what you've done." He just says, "Everyone get ready. There's gonna be a party!"

I think we miss that crazy detail sometimes: The son has a well-prepared confession, and he's rehearsed it and he says it well when the time comes, but his dad doesn't even say "It's OK, I forgive you." He skips all that and goes straight to the party plans. From the minute he lifts his head and sees his wandering son coming along the road he's already planning the celebration.

Maybe there's no serious lesson in this parable. Maybe it's just about the joy of a parent when a lost child comes home. Maybe it's about repentance, and for this moment repentance just means stopping and turning around and seeing that God is already running down the road to meet us with a hug and a ring and a laugh and new shoes and a feast.

We don't need to try to pull something deeper out of the story than the love of this father – or it could be a mother with that kind of love too – and the joy when the child comes home.

Think for a minute about what life has been like for you and for us and for the world this last while. We wander around in the world, sometimes lost, or sometimes feeling like we're really at home where we are. Out in the world you may have had conflict and struggle with some of the people around you, and you might have handled it poorly or you might have handled it well. Maybe some of us have had some great moments with friends lately, sitting at the dining room table after these last few years of being apart, and then in the living room for hours talking and laughing and being serious and being silly. Or maybe you've been *alone*, because you like to be alone; maybe you've been alone but wanted nothing more than to have some company. A week or a month or a lifetime has room for all those things.

We've wandered together with the shadow of this war in Ukraine hanging over everything – it's even pushed a pandemic aside for awhile – and everything about it seems wrong. A dictator is lost in the wilderness of his own ego and has forced millions of people to flee far away from home; we've all seen and heard so

much all this time. I've talked with so many people these last few weeks who are peaceful peaceful people, but who feel kind of lost and confused now because they find themselves thinking very unpeaceful things about Putin and power and how the world should respond. Add that to all the same scenes playing out in places like Yemen or South Sudan or fill in the blank.... Sadly, a week or a month or a lifetime of the world seems to have too much room for these things that happen.

Surely there are signs of life and grace all around too, and we carry these with us as well. That meal with friends and the joyful reunions of people who haven't been together for what seems like forever. Stories of the kindness of strangers who open their homes to tired refugees. Live music is making a comeback, and people are carefully returning – or, let's be honest, not returning carefully enough, but it's so hard to resist – to restaurants and theatres and other places where real live humans gather like real live humans are created to do.

The geese are back. Grass is starting to crawl its way up out of more snow than a lot of us have ever seen around here before. The flood forecast has been downgraded a bit, maybe we're getting that slow melt that we need.

Life has room for all these things: so much grace, so much hurt; so broken and so beloved. We experience it all...all at the same time. And all this while there's this story of the love of this father – or it could be a mother with that kind of love too – and the joy when the child comes home.

About 25 minutes ago we gathered together again, as we are inclined to do. Whether you drove up to the church, parked the car, and stepped in the door, or

you sat down in the living room and turned on a device and clicked the link, we all ended up together like we are now, and we sat or stood and had a moment of honesty; coming clean. We said:

Loving God, we confess that we have turned from your way to follow our own ways.

Forgive us for the times....

we have spoken or acted too quickly;

we have not spoken or acted at all;

we have hurt those closest to us;

we have hurt those we have yet to know;

we have thought more about ourselves than others;

we have thought less of ourselves than we ought....

We came home, like that youngest son shuffling along the road, maybe worn out by the things we have seen and known and suffered and done, and we confessed the ways that you, I, we, the world, have gone wrong. We finished that confession, heard the word of forgiveness, then started out fresh. We've been, as Val and I call it, "churching it up" ever since. We sang. We read from Scripture, and we heard ancient words that people like us and people not at all like us have been listening to for a few thousand years now. Isn't that cool? We sang some more – music is good, and someone once said that whoever sings prays twice. We'll sing again and we'll speak what we believe, even if it's hard to do sometimes, and we'll pray some more because somehow we keep on trusting that God hears and it matters. And that's good.

But here's what else has been happening. God was sitting in the rocker on the front porch, and as soon as we started to speak that confession God looked up and saw us coming down the road. We got a few sentences in and God listened closer and squinted into the distance and said, "Is it really them?" And we kept talking and God got said "*It is* them!", and God got up out of the chair and started sprinting down the road and thinking about a feast and how great it'll be when we all sit down together for the first time in forever; and while we keep on singing and praying and worshiping all this whole time, God keeps bouncing down the road in disbelief that we've finally come home, and God can't wait, and we all keep on talking, and finally God meets us on the road and says, "You're here! You're alive! There's gonna be a party!" And we sit at the table and hear the host say, "This is my body, my life, everything I've got, given for you, given already, given right from day one, given for you. You're found! You're alive!"

While we repent and return and wander and worship, we are met by this one who greets us with a joy and a love that will catch us by surprise; a joy and a love that break evil and shatter death; a joy and a love that will heal the broken world. AMEN.