

“The Third Conversion”
Lent 4c
Luke 15

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

The folk ballad “500 Miles” is not the kind of music we usually hear in church. However, recently I came across a version with some lyrics that are new to me. They bear on the parable of the prodigal son so bear with me while I play the song for you.

We do not know why the person in this song left home any more than we know why the younger son left the Father's house. We often do not know. Maybe it was some hurt given him. Perhaps it was an immature impulse that sent him out the door. Whatever the details are – hurt given or immature impulse – there is now distance between the prodigal son in the story, the balladeer in the song and those family members still at home. We know from experience that sometimes such distance exists even without leaving home. A theologian named Gustavo Gutierrez defines sin as what we do to cause “a breach of friendship with God and other.” There has been some breach of friendship in the homes of the prodigal and the balladeer.

The song takes a promising turn with the third and fourth stanzas. “Tear drops fell on mama's note when I read the things she wrote. She said, ‘We miss you, hon, we love you, come on home.’ Well I didn't have to pack. I had it all right on my back. Now I'm 500 miles away from home.” We get our hopes up. She is going home, don't you think? Maybe the next verse will describe the tearful reunion and a party with dancing.

What brings the prodigal back home is not a note from his father or word from his mother. Hunger is what brings him to himself. Many people assume he is repentant. I'm not so sure. In other of Jesus' parables the person who talks to himself is a conniver. We get it in the very next chapter in the parable of the dishonest steward. His master discovered his dishonesty

and fired him. He came to himself and schemed up a plan to save himself. I think hunger overcame the prodigal's pride and his shame. He rehearses a penitent's speech and heads home, hoping for some sort of place in his father's plantation. His father sees him coming from a distance and runs out to him and restores him to the family and orders up a big celebration. His son who was dead is alive. His son who was lost is found.

The balladeer never made it home. I had high hopes for her and kept listening to the song again and again hoping I had heard wrong. But the next verse says, "All these years and all these roads never lead me back to you. I'm always 500 miles away from home. Away from home, Away from home, always out here on my own. I'm still 500 miles away from home."

We are not told what keeps her away. But I've been thinking about the possibilities. Perhaps, unlike the prodigal son, she knew that from a distance she would spot her father in the picture window of the house but he would not run out to greet her. She pictured him stepping out of sight as she reached the front door. The scene she predicted was of a servant coming to the door and saying, "Your father asks that you go around back and wait." The father she knew would keep her waiting and then come out to hear her story. Unlike the prodigal's father he would let her recite the whole sad tale she had rehearsed. Then what? She was not sure. That's why she couldn't go home. Her father did not possess a dependable mercy. Maybe he would turn and walk away. Maybe he would send her to the servants' quarters, let her take up a position as her brother's maid. And maybe little by little over time her father's heart would warm a bit if she proved her repentance was sincere. Maybe and maybe not.

What could keep her away I'm sure would be the resentment of a brother such as the prodigal had. One preacher characterized the older brother as saying, "Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a

new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing.” What could keep the balladeer from coming home is a brother like that one, generous with resentment and stingy on mercy. But consider this from the older brother’s viewpoint. Does not throwing a party for the prodigal condone what he did? The father did not even let him finish his apology. Should there not be some trial period in which the prodigal brother proves his sincerity?

I want to be clear that this parable is not a criticism of those parents who have had to do the hard thing, the tough-love thing and refuse their son or daughter yet another bailout. They refuse because all they are doing is enabling them to continue to make bad choices, the consequences of which they never have to face. These parents know the meaning of suffering love. We see such suffering love in the father of the parable.

Jesus spoke this story to those who criticized him for keeping company, even going to dinner, with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors and sinners are the prodigal in Jesus’ story. The scribes and Pharisees are the elder brother. They resented the time Jesus spent with this riff-raff. They were offended when Jesus announced God’s love to people, who, by the way they lived, showed no interest in God. In the story Jesus tells, the father loved both sons. The father went out to each of them to bring them home. It is the father’s generosity, his dependable mercy that has the power to bring home both sons.

Last Sunday, Dan Lehmann in his mission moment reminded us that Luther called for a third conversion. The first conversions are of the heart and the mind. The third conversion is of the purse. What I’m thinking is, if Jesus is right in saying where our treasure is there will our hearts be also, perhaps the purse needs to be the first conversion. If we open our purse strings for the sake of the Gospel then our hearts and minds will follow. The older brother makes it clear

that mercy and money occupy the same purse. What has the power to convert us, purse, heart, and mind, is God's own generosity, God's dependable mercy.

There were two sons in the story. But there is a third son who plays a major role in how the story turns out. The one who tells it is God's one and only Son, sent from the Father's heart. God opened wide to us the purse strings of his mercy. He did not begrudge the cost of searching us out whether we are prodigal or resentful. Jesus is the Son of God who wandered far from home for our sakes. He wandered as far as we can get from God, all the way to the grave. He went to the far country in order to bring us home. Paul says God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Jesus stepped into the breach we caused. By his dying and rising he restores us to friendship with God and more than that, to a place in God's household as sons and daughters, heirs of God's fortune. Jesus is the bridge over which we travel the homeward way to God in company with all those who travel that path. When we see people headed the other direction we shout encouragement, "Come with us. Stay with us. Keep company with us at this oasis of food, drink and bath."

The faithful path we travel together in the course of the week we rehearse here. We walk this pathway, answering the altar call, "Come, for all is now ready." Today we also walk it, bringing forward our faith promises, as testimony to our faith. We open our purse strings for the sake of the good news, trusting that hearts and minds will follow. In Jesus' name, Amen.