

“GOING HOME”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Lent 4-C, March 31, 2019

It was the **American Novelist Thomas Wolfe**, born in **Asheville, North Carolina in 1900**, and who died, when he was **only 38 years old**, who is attributed as the originator of these well-known words: **“You can’t go home again!”** And why? Because these very words comprise the title of one of his four, rather lengthy novels that Thomas Wolfe wrote.

Perhaps you’ve found these words to be true in your own life too!

Though you are living in a different part of the United States today, **you went back home to the town where you grew up, and you found you way back to your childhood home**; that is still standing. **The reason you became awestruck is because you remember your childhood home being much larger in size, back then, than you could ever assess it to be today!**

And you found the **same thing to be true about the yard**; that yard that you loved to play in as a kid, with your childhood friends in your neighborhood. Somehow **that yard seemed to be so much larger back then, that to use a modern-day colloquialism** only seems to be the size of a “postage stamp” to you today!

Is it true, that you can’t go home again?

This is exactly what that younger son of the father was feeling, and thinking and saying out loud, to himself at first, in the words of our Gospel lesson today!

This younger of the father’s two sons had done a rather reprehensible, shameful and unthinkable thing, when he **went to his father one day and asked for his share of his father’s inheritance early, in that present day**, which would have amounted to about 1/3 the cash value of his father’s total estate.

According to **Levitical LAW**, if there were two sons, the firstborn son was to receive 2/3 of the estate and the younger son was to receive 1/3 of the estate.

Somehow, this younger of the two sons, got the idea that life at home was just too demanding; too hard; too exhaustive; getting up every morning, at the crack of dawn, milking cows and tending to the livestock, and then going out into the fields to work, until almost sundown at the end of the afternoon!

Here was a young man who was being **overwhelmed**, he **contended**, by the **responsibilities being expected of him in life**, though he could never really learn to probably estimate the immense value that was being returned to him through his sweat and toil.

While says in the Book of Ecclesiastes 2:24, ***“There is nothing better than that a man should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil, for this, I saw too, is from the hand of the Lord!”***

This was certainly not a valuable assessment of life that the younger of this father’s two sons could ever have agreed to; and certainly not initially.

This younger son had brazenly asked for his share of his father’s inheritance before his father had even died, and in doing so, was openly stating that as far as he was concerned—he would just as soon have hoped that his father had died, so that he would not have to put himself in such an awkward position.

This was the first major offense that the younger son committed against his father!

And yet, whether you believe it or not, this father, despite the **great inappropriateness of his impudent son’s request**, granted his young son, his desire; giving him what would have been in cold hard cash, about 1/3 the value of his father’s estate!

The first major offense of the younger son was to somehow muster up enough gall, and nerve, with which to approach his father in making such a dubious request!

The second major offense, of this son, was that when he received it, a few days later, he gathered all that he had and traveled into a far country and there he squandered his money in reckless living!

Foolishly, living only for the moment, **never really realizing the immense value of the cash sum that had been handed to him, with a totally inability to put any brakes on his wishes and desires at all, knowing nothing, at this point in his life, about the art of delaying one's own gratification, in the hopes of receiving a greater prize, he soon squandered his inheritance wastefully; living only for the moment, with no thought to his future, with no consideration being given to the great reality that his vast sum of money would soon be depleted! But that VAST SUM OF MONEY DID RUN OUT! And on top of this reality, which was a real eye-opener, the clouds above refused to share their precipitation with the thirsty ground below them, so that a drought soon descended upon the ground and a devastating famine became an undeniable reality!**

Though it was far from the most ideal job, the younger son was able, somehow, to acquire some base form of menial labor—getting a very demeaning job, especially for a young Jewish man like himself; feeding pigs, though a more accurate job description for this young man would have been the job of slopping hogs. **By this time, the young man's clothing had become worn out! And he was starving!**

He was that kind of young man like many young men in American households today, who could easily have drunk two gallons of whole milk, that a mother puts in the refrigerator each Tuesday, for that very purpose!

This young man was so hungry—so hungry that he would have gladly eaten the pig's leftovers, but that's the problem with pigs, you know **is that they always eat like pigs, so that there was nothing ever leftover**, after they had eaten from which he could then eat! Nothing!

He's desperate. He's so very desperate that he hatches another plan to take care of himself. He believes, he can't go home again—at least not as a son. But maybe, well, maybe, just maybe, **his father would be willing to give him a job; a job as a hired hand, and, at least, in his father's home, there'd be no hogs to slop, he could be sure of this!** If his father would at least be willing to give him a minimum wage job at \$7.25 an hour, then he could, at least, hopefully purchase something to eat, from someone, that was edible and safe for human consumption!

And so, he must have composed his speech, in his mind, while he was on his way back home, saying it to himself repeatedly: *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and earth and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as you would, one of your hired hands!"*

If his father were to give him a job, as a hired hand, at least, then, he would have a minimal hope of surviving the foolish venture he had embarked upon!

So, he says the words over and over again to himself, ad nauseum, as he makes his way back home: ***"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of the hired hands."***

What this young boy had no ability to comprehend, is that his deeply grieving and mournful father had been waiting, hoping, and praying, that somehow, some day, his wayward son would come back home!

As much as his own heart was breaking, he wanted his child back home!

Every day, several times a day, the heartbroken father would step out on the front porch of his farmhouse, using his right hand to shade his eyes from the brightly-glaring sun! He would look off into the distance, all in the hope of one day being able to spot his wayward son, coming back home!

He cried a million tears! He must have falsely concluded, at times, that his son was more than likely dead. For several nights in a row, the father couldn't sleep at all, until he became to exhausted that he collapsed into his bed, so bone-tired, for two nights, that he couldn't even move!

One day, as the old man gazed into the distance from his porch, he saw something. It was a male figure, off in the distance, coming down the road. He was about the **height of his son, but only skin and bones**. The man was walking slowly, his head bowed in defeat and humiliation, each step a chore, toward the father's house.

And as the figure came closer, the father knew. *It was his son! It was his long-awaited, long lost son! His boy had come home!*

And Dad couldn't wait! Moved by compassion and love, unable to contain his joy, he RAN out to the road, threw his arms around his son, tears flowing, and embraced him like the star-player of a winning team that had just taken place of a major, college, basketball championship, that took place here in the states this past week; you know: "March Madness!"

The son—hungry, tired, and desperate—began his well-rehearsed speech. **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."**

He had planned another line, of course—a plea that his father would take him back as a hired hand—but before he could blurt it out, **the father gave rapid-fire instructions to his servants: "Quick, now! Bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet—no bare feet, like a slave, for my boy! And kill the fatted calf. We're going to have a party to celebrate my son's return!"**

You see, the father had another idea than his son. He figured the boy *could* come home again—home again, not as a hired hand, but as a beloved son. And isn't this just like God, just like our God, whom Jesus came into the world to reveal to us? With God, we *always* have a home. We can go home again! With God, there is a standing invitation to those who have wandered away: "Come home!" **With God, there is forgiveness and welcome and divine joy for those who have left, who have discovered the emptiness of life without God, and who want to come back. And there's no probation to be worked off, no time served as a hired hand necessary, before one can again be called "daughter" or "son" of God!**

Now that's not necessarily fair, is it! No penalty, no probation, not even a scolding when sinners return home. Just God's joy! Just a party thrown in honor of the wayward one who has returned!

It sounds absurd, doesn't it? It sounds like the father who, when his daughter nearly flunked out of college, rewarded her with a brand-new BMW. When this father's pastor asked him, "Dan, why in the world did you do that?" the father responded by saying: "Well, she's had such a struggle. She was so upset about her grades. I didn't want her to get more discouraged. I thought she needed a boost, so I bought her a car."

"I thought he needed a boost, so I took him back as my son, and threw a party in his honor," the father in our story might reply. It's not only absurd. It's not fair!

Especially to the older brother in the story. **He's the one who'd stayed home with Dad. He's the one who had worked hard—like a slave in his father's house—**while the younger one was off wasting the money his Dad had, so very foolishly and prematurely given to him. The older son was the *good* child, and dad had never even roasted a goat for him!

We can understand his resentment, can't we, when he comes in from the field, hears music and laughter, asks what's going on, and learns that the younger son—he can't even call him "brother"—has come home!

We can understand how he would say to his father, **"I feel like a slave in your house!"** and describe his brother as **"that son of yours."**

We can understand that. Maybe we've even been in his place, resenting the treatment someone else has gotten.

What's fair about *that*?

The father has a response to that, doesn't he? He reminds the older son, "You are *always* my son! There's *always* a home for you here! Everything I have—all this mercy, all this joy, all this love, all this forgiveness—it's all *for you*, my son, my daughter!"

Just like God!

The younger son wandered from home by leaving. But the older son had left home, too—hadn't he; without even leaving the household? He thought he had to *earn* his father's favor. He labored grudgingly, with resentment. He lived with bitterness against his brother—such bitterness that he couldn't even *call* him his brother! His father's love was there for him, in abundance, and what did the older son do? He pushed that love away!

And what does the father do? Well, he comes searching. In fact, he gives up his dignity.

It was considered shameful in that society for a man to hike up his robe and run in public, like the father in the story did.

And it was considered shameful, beneath God's dignity, for God's own beloved Son to go to a humiliating death on a cross.

But that's just what God did. For you, for me, for the world, for all who need a home with God—those far away, and those in the household but not at home.

In our Epistle Lesson today, St. Paul is talking about how God, through the Gospel, longs to make us ambassadors in this world of his ministry of reconciliation. Those who have been justified by grace, are to extend God's forgiveness to all they can. "We beseech you, therefore, be reconciled through Christ."

The Apostle John says: "If anyone says that he love God, but hates his brother, that man is a liar. For if a man does not love his brother or sister, whom he sees, how can he love God whom he has not seen!"

Friends, through Jesus, we call all go home again. And through Jesus we can welcome others into our home in him too. Amen