

WHERE IS HOME?

A Twenty-First Century Interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32

as presented to Peace Mennonite Church, 11001 Midway Road, Dallas, Texas 75229
Sunday 26 October 2008 copyright © by Steven Welp

The parable of the prodigal son is the classic story with a happy ending. The lesson taught here appears to center on forgiveness and the fulfillment of the three pillar virtues of Christianity: Faith, hope and love. The story tells of a wayward son returning to the ancestral home after squandering his inheritance and the celebration of his return in the unconditional love of a father for his son. But is there a deeper Truth to be found in this parable?

The foundation upon which the whole parable stands, and which the reader takes for granted, is that we assume the nature of the family to which the son returns, the society and civilization in which the family exists, the economics, the politics, and particularly the underlying confidence in each of those systems that cement the permanence of that particular world view. But what would happen to this parable and its happy ending if, while the son were away, the farm failed and were auctioned off, the wife left with the kids, the dad had a nervous breakdown and ended up homeless and living on the streets? There would be no joyful homecoming because there would be no home. The first questions we might ask are: "How could this happen?" "Where were his friends?" "Where was the government safety net?" "Where was the bank?" - and most importantly - "Where is home?"

I think we are asking ourselves the same questions about our world today. How could our home, planet earth, and its life blood, the entire world economy, be brought to its knees in a few short months? Why didn't those in whom we entrust our economies and our systems of checks and balances know this was coming and prevent it? Many point their finger to the mortgage crisis and to the extension of credit for home purchases to those who could not really afford the homes. And, we are told, it all began as an effort by an earlier administration to enable lower-income citizens to realize the American dream of home ownership. And now, instead of the American dream having been realized, hope has been crushed and millions have either lost their homes or are in danger of losing them as well as their jobs. Was it just greed masquerading as good will all along? Many are now asking - "Where is home?"

Our government sprang into action to solve the crisis. And what was their solution? Help those at the bottom who suffer the most, who lost their homes and even their jobs? No. The answer was to give money to the very people who created the problem. How could they do that, we might ask? Is it possible those who made that decision thought they were like the father in the prodigal son, forgiving those who made these disastrous mistakes and moving forward to a solution? Or was it just more greed with a slightly different face? There are those who say, "Wait! This is not the first time this has happened! We keep 'bailing out' those whose greed destroys other's lives. Will no one ever be held accountable? Are we going to keep 'forgiving' these unbridled excesses until the country is bankrupt? Why can't ordinary citizens have the luxury of this 'forgiveness' and never have to pay their debts? Why is it that

'Wall Street' always seems to take precedence over 'Main Street'?" There is an outcry now for accountability and justice, just as the brother of the prodigal son states in this parable.

The second son in the parable cries out to his father for justice when he says to his father "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" The son's argument being that his dad is rewarding his brother's sinful behavior while ignoring his own exemplary behavior and that this is a gross injustice, showing partiality by both rewarding bad behavior and failing to reward good behavior. This also implies that even though his brother repented, 'forgiving' another's bad or sinful behavior is a bad example and simply encourages more bad behavior by showing others this sort of behavior is tolerated and excused. And, by extension, there are those unrepentant who see forgiveness as a shield against accountability. To the selfish and unrepentant, forgiveness is an invitation to abuse and actually protects the perpetrator, who either has no conscience or refuses to exercise it, taunting justice, defying judgement.

And, like our current economic meltdown, 'forgiving' the unrepentant who manipulated the markets to their advantage merely encouraged them to do more of the same, pouring gasoline on the fires of greed with ever greater abuses year after year. The difference, then, in these two points of view concerning the mechanics of forgiveness in unconditional love is that the prodigal son's repentance precipitated and gave opportunity for the father's forgiveness. The unrepentant simply take advantage of the situation and have no intention of changing their behavior, seeing forgiveness as an opportunity to take more and more. In other words, true forgiveness demands its flip-side, repentance, to restore both parties and the environment to its 'original' pre-sin state of being. A one-sided forgiveness without the other's repentance, while extending the opportunity for voluntary repentance, simultaneously provides occasion for further sin on the part of the unrepentant and of that sin luring others into sin and injuring innocent victims as well. The father responded to the second son by saying "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because, this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found." In other words, had the son not softened his heart and repented he may have died in his sins and there would be nothing to celebrate and no opportunity for forgiveness. Therefore forgiveness is not the centerpiece of this parable, but repentance, just as the New Testament begins with repentance, not forgiveness. Being 'born again' begins with repentance. True eternal life is born in repentance. And justice may be found in the dynamic relationship between repentance and forgiveness.

So the answer to the title's question "Where is Home?" is found in the location of repentance in a person's life. There are two sayings in the English language that point to the answer: "Home is where the heart is"; and, "to have a change of heart". Home is not so much a geographic piece of land as it is a state of being which is found in the human heart, a location in relationship to God and the hierarchy of creation. It is the contrite heart, our repentance, that triggers our new life in the spirit,

the "born again" experience, which is "Home", the living relationship between God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and us. In repentance is that free will offering of ourselves that provides the actively modulating and voluntary restraint upon our own lives that creates spontaneous justice without any outside interference. And the foundation upon which this whole world view stands in our lives, as in this parable, is the establishment of absolute boundaries within which we are positively encouraged to remain. This takes place in the speaking and teaching of the Word of God where we are educated in that love to understand these boundaries exist for our benefit and serve our best interest. The dynamics of being born again and our subsequent relationship to God is inherently just and make true, unconditional Love possible. Our "Home" is infinite and eternal Love where there is no need to cry out for justice.

Human love is not big enough to include repentance, forgiveness, restitution, reconciliation and restoration all under the umbrella of justice. There is a point at which the peace of unconditional love cannot be kept without justice as a counterbalancing measure, either internally as repentance or externally being imposed upon those who refuse to restrain their own behavior as they respect and value the lives of others in compassion and love. And there is a point at which the love expressed is not only peaceful as we understand unconditional love to be, it is also just as in 'doing the right thing', in both being accountable and holding others accountable, in reciprocity of that same love. So, while on the one hand, we as Christians are admonished not to judge others, we are also enjoined to exhort and hold others accountable for their behavior, to stand up and speak out against and stop sinful behavior and its poisonous and destructive effects upon others, upon the fabric of the social order, and upon the power of love itself. This is because to not admonish and exhort others binds the power of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and in the world. Fear and cowardice allow evil to rule. Therefore, silence and passivity is not an option because acquiescence is complicit with sin which makes one an accessory to that sin. And sin, of course, is the antithesis of love.

And that is why we are taught there are things we must not do as well as things we must do. The Old Testament is known for its "thou shalt nots", while the New Testament for "thou shalt". It is for that reason we find the following admonitions in both the old and new testaments, all of which indicate a permanent and ongoing condition of obligations in service to others:

"...nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake." Leviticus 19:16

"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks...you shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you saying; 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land'" Deuteronomy 15:7-8 & 10-11

"And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart" Galatians 6:9

"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachings to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." 2 Timothy 4:1-5

"My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day, and you say to them, 'Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed,' but do not meet their daily needs, what good is that? So it is with faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless." James 2:14-17

So home for a Christian is where their Godly love is expressed both as service to others in need and encouraging others in their Christian walk to "do the right thing". Is your heart right with God and maximized to serve the greatest good for the greatest number of people? Are you preaching the Good News and sharing the love of Christ by way of admonition and exhortation, awakening the conscience of those who need to learn the ways of love? There is always more work to do and I believe all of us can here at Peace Mennonite Church can do more to spread the Gospel and grow itself in line with its history and in a way much needed here in the Dallas Metroplex. Here are a few suggestions for consideration:

1. Street protests of social justice issues to spread the Gospel message;
2. Lighted marquee sign near the street exhorting passers-by;
3. Use PSA's in local media to preach the Gospel message;
4. Make better use of the facilities during the week for Christian activities by inviting outside youth and adults.

The underlying message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, then, is that Home is where ever there is a repentant heart. That is because it is only the born-again repentant heart which expresses true unconditional love, that can give and receive love, that is capable of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration in justice. The repentant heart proves itself again and again in service to others in need, rather than be centered on self, upon what the self may obtain, upon greed. Our Christian responsibility is to shine our light where ever we are, exemplified both by what we do and don't do and by what we say and don't say. We know it is better to give than receive, but we have, by shirking our Christian responsibilities, denied the power of the Holy Spirit by being afraid to speak up and speak out about what is the right thing to do. Had more people spoken out and demanded justice for the disenfranchised and the poor, demanded justice for the greedy all along, we may have been able to prevent the catastrophe we face today.