

The Father Who Waits

(Luke 15:1-13, 11b-32)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 31, 2019

In the name of the one God – creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Many years ago, a family of six – a father and mother, two sons and two daughters – moved into an old house sitting on a 200-acre dairy farm in Bedford County. The driveway to the house was 4/10 of a mile long, and each morning during the school year the kids would be dropped off by one of their parents up at the main road so they could catch the bus to school. In the afternoon when the bus dropped them off, they would (weather-permitting) walk back down the driveway to the house – a walk that for young kids often seemed interminable, but which in reality only took about 10 or 15 minutes depending on how anxious they were to get back to the house.

On the first day of the school year after the family had moved in, one of the parents – or maybe both – waited in the front yard for the kids to return. They were able to see up the drive, past the milking barn and silos and various workshops and sheds, and could see the kids coming. There is even a photograph somewhere of them walking back down the drive ... small specks on the horizon made just a little bit larger by putting the lens of the camera up to the eyepiece of a pair of binoculars.

When the author of Luke writes that while the younger son was still far off on his journey home the father saw him, it resonates for me because it is something I have experienced. For me and my brother and sisters, it was the simple matter of walking home from the bus; we had not squandered an inheritance or gotten into (much) trouble and returned home in shame. Regardless, our parents saw us when we were still far off.

They were waiting. And we find the same thing in this Gospel reading.

When considering this parable, several aspects of it often stand out: the shame of the younger son; the anger of the older son; the love and forgiveness displayed by the father. But there is one other aspect I contend is important to mark as well: presence. Throughout the parable, the father was there. He, too, was waiting.

I read this parable as four small scenes making up a larger story. First, the youngest son approaches his father and asks for his portion of the inheritance, and his father agrees. The son then goes off and squanders it all, pushing his life into the realm of homelessness and hunger. Next, when he is at a breaking point, when his life has spiraled so far out of control and he is at the point of simply trying to survive, he exercises his only option and carries his shame back home ... only to be met by his father and celebrated and loved. And then finally, the older son

who had remained with his father throws a hissy fit because he had not been celebrated in the same way as his brother.

There is a great deal to this parable shared by Jesus, but it is important to note who it is about. It is not just about the younger son; in fact, calling it the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not sufficient. It is not about the older brother; it would be no less correct to call it the Parable of the Angry Son Who Stayed. No, at its core it is a parable about the father ... the patience of the father ... the love of the father ... the forgiveness of the father. Because of the centrality of the father to this story, it perhaps should in fact be called (as many theologians and commentators have stated) the Parable of the Father's Love.¹

This is one of the many passages in Scripture when I consider not just what is written, but what is missing ... what is taking place in the silence among the words. We see the father and his sons. We see the before and after ... the beginning and the end. But apart from the experiences of the younger son, we do not see during. And that is where I think some of the power of the love of the father ... of the love of God ... is found: during. In the background, quietly lingering behind the in-your-face imagery of the dissolute living of the son ... of his self-imposed poverty, his necessary servanthood to another, his overwhelming hunger and digging through the trough of the pigs to try and find something to eat ... his father is there.

Waiting.

He could not live his life for him. He could not make decisions for him. But when the recklessness of his son resulted in a shattered life and when all that remained was wreckage, he would be there to welcome him back.

His son felt guilt; he felt shame; in his mind he had hoped his father would forgive him. As he tells his father, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."² As far as he knew, he had received what he had asked for; in a legal sense, there was no further claim on his father beyond the share of the inheritance he had already received.³ Even beyond that, in a much more personal and familial way, he thought that he no longer deserved to even be considered a son.⁴

And the reaction of his father? A hug. A kiss. The best jewelry and clothes. A feast. A celebration. Did he feel the pain of a parent at seeing how the life of his son had turned out? Absolutely. Any parent who loves and cares deeply for their children would do the same. When their child is hurt, they feel hurt. When a child is disappointed, they feel disappointment. And while it is not spelled out here, we know his father feels it. But he rejoiced at his return.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 93, and Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: X-XXIV*, p. 1084.

² Luke 15:21 (NRSV).

³ Fitzmyer, p. 1089.

⁴ Ibid.

We know **God** feels it about us, too. We feel disappointment ... and we disappoint others. We are hurt ... and we hurt one another. We sin ... and our sins affect others. When we experience these, and when we cause these, God feels them and experiences them. And yet, like the father in the parable, when we reach the end of our rope and decide to turn back to God ... when we are at the bottom of the pit ... when we feel separated ... when we feel lost ... when we no longer feel deserving of the title “beloved daughter or son of God” ... ***God is there. God is waiting.*** God sees us approaching from far up the driveway and does much more than put the camera to the binoculars: God runs to meet us. God rejoices.

As Henri Nouwen wrote about God as our father in his classic book *Return of the Prodigal Son*,

*There is no lust, greed, anger, resentment, jealousy, or vengeance in his lost children that has not caused immense grief to his own heart. The grief is so deep because the heart is so pure. From the deep inner place where love embraces all human grief, the Father reaches out to his children. The touch of his hands, radiating inner light, seeks only to heal. Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting.*⁵

Always waiting. No matter what we do, God waits for us. No matter how far we wander or how much we separate ourselves, God waits for us. And when we make decisions or allow life to pull us off the path ... when we hurt ourselves or others ... when we disappoint ourselves or one another ... when we may feel like the last thing we deserve is love or forgiveness ... God waits for us.

And God will welcome us back with the love, joy and celebration of a child who has gone away and has at last returned home.

Amen.

⁵ Nouwen. p. 95.