

Welcome Home! By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L4070325
2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Luke 15:1-3, 12-32
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 25 March, 2007

What is home? A girl goes into a church building with her friends after school. They climb the stairs to the third floor of the Sunday school wing. They drink water, spew it out onto the shiny tile floor. Then, they take turns running and gleefully sliding on the slippery waxed floor. She wasn't a member of that church, but she felt at home enough that she and her friends could do that. The girl today is an ordained minister in the denomination of that church, and one of its staunchest supporters. When this woman was younger, she was told by her parents that if she were ever in any kind of trouble in any city, to find the nearest Disciples church and run to it for safety.

Home is not necessarily the place where you live or grow up. This girl's parents taught her that "home" is a safe place of refuge. The church unwittingly provided a home to the girl.

What is home for you? It might be where you live. It might be where your parents live. It might be a dorm room. It might be a neighbor's or friend's home. Home is a place where you are always welcomed. Robert Frost in his poem "Death of the Hired Man" wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

A friend wrote a meditation describing the hectic nature of American life today. For her, home is a sanctuary behind closed eyes. It is a place where she can meditate and feel God's loving arms sheltering her and welcoming her home.

Probably the most favorite of all of Jesus' parables is the one we call the "Prodigal Son" because it tells us God is our home. You know the story. The younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, and the father gives it to him. The son goes off as many of us do, thinking he's going to conquer the world. When things don't turn out quite as he planned, and when he's tired, hungry, and broke, he goes to the one place where he might be accepted. He goes home, expecting to be hired on as a servant to his own father.

The son trudges down that hot dusty road that leads to his old home, to his father's house. Off in the distance he sees a figure. The figure waves to him. He recognizes him. It's his father. "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."¹ The father met the son not with a lecture, not with an "I told you so," but with outstretched arms: "Welcome home!"

We have run away from home in the same way, full of self-confidence. We know the right formulas. We know the answers. No more boundaries, no more silly rules. No more, "Where are you going, and when will you be back home?" We have all hit the same brick walls, the same disappointments. Perhaps we've even known the same hunger and loneliness.

It takes humility to admit we weren't the success we thought we'd be. It takes real humility to head back home to say "I blew it. Can I live with you for a few months until I get it back together?"

Now, just because we are extravagant in our welcoming of an adult child back home, it does not mean that we have to give up boundaries. For a home to be comfortable, it needs to have rules and operating procedures. We have to know what to expect of each other when we live under the same roof. If a child left home because rules were too strict, that does not mean you

¹Luke 15:20

throw out all the rules when that child comes back. You can work together to formulate new rules that are acceptable to all in the house. This provides a framework for relationships.

We call this the parable of the Prodigal Son, but the father is prodigal also. "Prodigal" means rashly or wastefully extravagant. We know that the son was wastefully extravagant: he spent all he had, but the father was rashly and wastefully extravagant with his love. His lost son had come home, and he was happy.

Sometimes in life we run away from our spiritual home. There are periods when we don't have time for silly religious stuff. "I don't have time for church, I've got soccer practice on Sunday." "I don't have time for church, I have to do some work at the office." "I'm too practical for that religious stuff."

But, when we are spiritually hungry and impoverished, when we stop and realize that soccer and a paycheck are not all there is to life, we "come to ourselves;" we come to our senses. We begin the long and painful process of walking back to our spiritual home, our place of refuge, back to church. There, we find God waiting for us,-- no, running toward us with outstretched arms. It feels so good. No words of judgment, but a welcoming feast. Such is God's unconditional love for us.

Welcome home!

Home is not necessarily a place. It is in whatever way we can feel God's arms outstretched towards us. Home is where God is. So it doesn't make a lot of difference where our house is. We can be at home anywhere, as long as we can feel God's love.

I find the pronouns of this parable particularly interesting. The servant says, "your brother has come home." The father says, "this son of mine." The older brother says, "This son of yours" The father replies, "This brother of yours."

In a fit of anger, one parent might say to the other, "Wait 'til you hear what your son did today." The older son was trying to pawn his brother off: He was divorcing himself of his brother, with whom he was quite angry. The father, who loves both dearly, reaffirms the brothers' relationships with each other: "This brother of yours."

Brothers and sisters of the faith, God loves each of us like the father in that parable. God's arms are outstretched to you and to me, and God says, "Welcome home."

God also asks us to recognize each other as brothers and sisters. Our only proper words to each other are, "Brother, welcome home." "Sister, welcome home."