

The Son in the Far Country

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Text: Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Today we'll be getting our hands dirty.

The traditional interpretation of this parable can be summarized as follows. "With unexpected love and grace, the Father welcomes back sinners who turn to Him." How we need this message. The only antidote to our intense loneliness is the love of God. And of all the unexpected things in this world, God's love and grace are the most unexpected because in our hearts we know that they are undeserved. In this interpretation, the younger son experiences this life-changing encounter with the unexpected, undeserved love of God.

That's not the interpretation we'll be talking about today. Let's be clear—you don't have to choose between these two interpretations; in fact, I suggest you see both of them as valid.

The second interpretation is not quite as clean as the first. Here the younger son in the parable represents the Son Jesus Christ, not because He is prodigal but because He goes into the far country, partakes of the nature and the culture of the people of the far country, and then returns to the Father. This interpretation is strengthened by the mention of death in the passage: the father in the parable twice declares that: "this son of mine was dead and is alive again." Just like Jesus.

The Nicene Creed says of Jesus that He was "True God from True God" and that He "was made man." Jesus has two natures. Just as the prodigal son goes into the far country, so Jesus went came down from heaven and went into the far country where he took on our nature. Even more so, in the far country, the Son does not hang around "on the fringes," where he might be safe, but He dives right in. He fully partakes, as true man (Heb 4:15). Then He leaves this world to go to back to the Father (Jn 13:1), to reestablish fellowship with the Father, and to prepare a place for us with the Father (Jn 14:2).

This interpretation has profound implications for how we should view our church and our community. Perhaps in one church or another you have seen the sign, "Outside these walls you *are* the Church." True enough. But why do we need to be reminded about this? I think it's because we desperately want to be the Church *inside* these walls. We want to be a family, and the place for a family is a home, and this is our home. You see, we're used to a religious strategy where "The Church wants the world to become the Church." "The Church wants the world to *become* the Church." "Come in, you're welcome here. We'll teach you all the things about our church and our worship and our coffee hour and our church's culture and you can join our family. You'll fit right in."

When Jesus says, "Go into the far country as my ambassadors," we respond, "How about we just gather more people into the community?" For the sake of the community. For the *advantage* of the community. So we feel *better* about ourselves. We truly believe that the people of the world are better off inside this building. We know *we* are.

In 1944, when he was in prison and awaiting death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wondered why so many Germans could be Christians and so religious, and yet had been so powerless in the 1920s and

1930s. Why did so few of them stand up to the Nazi party? He concluded that people came to church, and people joined the church community really mostly to perpetuate what he called “religion.” But religion was really only Christian culture. They worshipped because Germans had worshipped for over a thousand years. This was their tradition; the community was their people. They were like the older brother in the parable who declared, “I’ve been a faithful son inside these four walls, father. My steadfastness is my advantage.” But there’s no power in a religion that is primarily religious culture and consequently there was little Christian resistance in Germany to the evil of the Nazis. They wanted the world to become the church, but in the end, church for them was only a place to be safe, to play it safe, and then potentially to use your faithfulness as a leverage with God, as the older brother did, who said, “Because I’ve been faithful, father, you owe *me*.”

I was a teacher in South Korea for two years and I remember landing at Kimpo airport. Alone. No one to meet me. Initially, I was filled with a mixture of bewilderment, fascination and terror at everything new. The language. The smells. The image of young women holding hands and walking with young women and young men walking arm in arm with young men. But no young women walking hand-in-hand with young men. That’s their culture. I was in the far country. After a couple days in Seoul I took the bus down to Taejon which was the city of the school I would be teaching at. And I met the American missionaries. And the missionary compound. Ten homes with a wall around it. It was a very comfortable place. The missionaries didn’t stay in the compound all day long—they went out to do their work—but they sure liked it when they came home. And I did, too.

Our message, then, to the world is, “Come join us and you will feel a little better about yourself. We’ll take care of you. You’ll be part of the Family of God.”

The reality is that the people outside the church—at least in the American and European cultures—they often don’t feel better when they come into our churches. They may not feel worse, but they don’t feel better and they don’t feel at home and they don’t want to feel at home. They don’t want our family. They have a family. Or they don’t *want* a family. When they say they are “spiritual but not religious,” they mean they want God (as best they know who He is) but have a hard time finding God inside the Church because there’s so much religion that is distracting them. The Church wants the world to become the Church, but the world is no longer interested. It *used* to be, perhaps, 50, 60, 100, 150 years ago in this country, but no longer. Praise God.

Praise God because Jesus “wants the Church to be the world.” Not to *become* the world. He wants us to be His ambassadors in the far country, and ambassadors always have allegiance to the country they come *from*, not the country that they live *in*. But He wants to send us out into the far country because that’s what He did. The Father sent Him; He sends us. Because for us to go into the far country is to die to all this self-importance and to be brought to the place of *famine*, where we say to ourselves and to our neighbors, “Look, I don’t have any food. Maybe you don’t either. I have an idea, though. And honestly, it’s my last resort. My father has a farm and I was thinking of going there. I won’t be family any more there, but he might let me be a servant, and at least I could eat. It might work for you, too.”

So instead of a sign *inside* the church that says, “Outside these walls you *are* the Church,” it would be better to have a sign *outside* the church that says, “Inside these walls you are the worshipping church” where newcomers—yes, the clean-cut, the unbaptized, the dissolute—(a) don’t feel unwelcome; and (b) experience the power and the presence of God. Namely, when they know that

we, like they, are people of the far country, not a religious family. That this is a church of the far country.

What does it mean for us to be in the far country?

Jesus is a realist. He doesn't necessarily mean a *literal* far country. You can be in the far country in your living room when you pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." And when you get to words, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," you're in the far country doing battle with the forces of evil—human evil, spiritual evil...--and because of the power of the Holy Spirit, you're *winning* that battle. All in your living room.

In fact, you can be in the far country right in *this* room, worshipping God and telling Him, "You want complete allegiance. I'm in. Now make it happen. Be my Jesus. Be *our* Jesus. Empower me--empower us--in this far country." Just like the son in far-away village, the place of "dissolute living," we will see things we cannot unsee and do things we will have doubts about doing and make friends who may not feel that they could possibly be welcomed in a place like this, a clean, well-lighted place full of nice people with well-ordered lives. Because the far country is a messy place. One of my professors at Regent College said that the definition of a saint is someone not afraid to get into a mess for someone else. Let's do everything we can to ensure that the world, if it graces us with its presence on a Sunday morning, is not made to feel unwelcome, especially by an attitude that says, "Hold still while we drag you into our family." It's not what they want; it's not what they need. They're hungry for the presence and power of God, not for our religion.

Jesus, the Son in the far country makes friends with the sinners and tax collectors that are mentioned at the beginning of this passage—the people of the far country--you and me, that neighbor, that person in line at Safeway, that family speaking Spanish in Mt. Vernon and that refugee family that would love a break. He helps the people of the far country; He gets in messes for people of the far country; and we can, too. We lack no power. We have *His* power.

In a sense the church is our family but in a more important sense the *world* is our family, and it's time for a family reunion, to drink deeply, to laugh and eat and do art and make funny faces and work alongside one another and realize, as Mother Theresa said, how much more we need the poor than the poor need us; and so how much more we need the refugees than the refugees need us; and so how much more we need the politicians than the politicians need us. Because the gospel has overcome *us*, just as it has overcome the world. And we, the religious, need constantly to be reminded of it.

It's a good time to stop being the older brother, who is faithful and stays at home and then tries to strong-arm God, saying, "Hey, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed you. And you never got *me* a calf; not even a *goat*. And my brother violates the family code and leaves our comfy, cozy family home and goes off to crazy land and for *him* you kill the fattened calf." That's religion. That's comfy, cozy, family, religion. The religious Church wants the world to become the Church; but Christ wants the Church to be the world. To be in the world, with the world and under the world. In 2016, change is in the air because the world can no longer abide our religion and it isn't so wild about our family, either. Praise God. Get the fattened calf. Because the world is still hungry. The people of the world long to fill their stomachs with the pea pods that the pigs eat; *and no one is giving them anything*.

Jesus is the Son sent into the far country, who forms new relationships, who sees things He cannot unsee, who feels things He cannot unfeel, who is sometimes beat up and frustrated and exhausted

to the point of saying, "How long do I have to put up with you people?" (Luckily, He does put up us.) In the far country He is tempted by every temptation known to humankind. And He allows the experience to change Him. He forms memories; He laughs; He dances; He eats lamb and hummus and olives and bread and wine. He forms friendships that last forever; He witnesses ugly behavior; He feels pain and hunger and homelessness; He hears tales told by idiots. He becomes filthy dirty with every bit of the dirt that it means to be a human, without ever deviating from the relationship with God and the right living before God that is His perfect righteousness. He suffers. He stands up for God's reputation. He became filthy dirty and *He loved it*. That's what it means that He became man.

Let us come, now, to confess that the Son is truly man and truly God, and then acknowledge His death and resurrection in the bread and wine. Let's ensure that the world does not feel unwelcome here. Let's go together, into the far country.