

Read Luke 15:11-32. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Jesus' stories always have an ulterior motive. Jesus always wants you to see more of God. Like the child who said to his Sunday School teacher, "I don't always understand the question, but I know the answer is always God." So let's look at God.

Moses was a man who wanted to know God. The burning bush lit that flame in him. The miracles before Pharaoh left Moses wanting more. He had this insatiable hunger for God. I suppose it was all that praying. One day he asked God, "Would you show yourself to me?"

God answered in the affirmative (Ex 34:6-8):

The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected -- even children in the third and fourth generations." Moses immediately threw himself to the ground and worshiped.

God had shared the essence of who God was. It was **God's signature identity**. Keep that in mind as we study the prodigal son over the next three weeks.

Moses had a signature identity too. He is "the man who pleads to God for his people."

"God, they didn't really mean to make that calf."

"God, we can't do this desert thing if you don't go with us."

"God, you must forgive, or other nations will say you couldn't bring us out."

What is your signature identity? How do you define yourself?

Each character in the story of The Prodigal Son has an identity and in understanding theirs, we are helped to understand our own, in relation to God.

Jesus told this story to explain why he associated with sinful people. That was his signature identity. The younger son is described as sinful. We begin with him.

Take a look at this picture by Rembrandt. (see picture at end) You see a larger-than-life old man in a gorgeous red cloak tenderly embracing a disheveled boy who is kneeling before him. He is dressed in rags. His shoes are so worn out that they won't stay on his feet. He seems exhausted; looking for a place to lay his head. He's a shadow of the brash, arrogant, demanding spendthrift who left home. So let's highlight his part of the story:

"The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living" (Lk 15:12-13).

We hear of such broken relationships. The son is breaking all the boundaries. He's disrespectfully encroaching on what rightfully belongs to his father. His contempt shouts out as he demands his inheritance before his father has died. This is outrageous!

But the father is worse. He doesn't argue. He doesn't try to control. He gives in to his son.

Now say this with me, "That's radical!"

Henri Nouwen says to demand such a thing of a Middle Eastern father would be met with a beating and strong rejection. But this father was different.

Sounds a little like God's signature verse: "I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness."

Wouldn't it be great to talk about the Father and skip the son? But until we understand the son's leaving, we can't really understand the Return of the Prodigal.

His move reflects a heartless rejection of his hometown and his family's values. Does the son desperately want to prove himself? Does he desire to throw off the responsibilities of his father's business? Is he simply looking for love in all the wrong places? We are not told the reason.

Perhaps we are not told because we are to put in our own reasons.

Sometimes we leave our spiritual "home" for the distant country of "running our own show" or we get tired of living for our heavenly Father, or we simply don't like his values, or we need the love and approval the world has to offer because God's love doesn't seem to be coming through. We forget the catechism, "I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."¹

Thus, we are seduced by the world's cry to follow your desires, prove yourself, be successful, gain popularity, get the perfect job. And we anxiously seek those things.

Perhaps we, then, can relate to this prodigal son's leaving for a distant country.

The son's actions caused a huge wall between home and him. His self-identifiers are:

- Selfish and uncaring
- Rebellious
- Grossly immature

Contrast that with the father, who "agreed to divide his wealth between his sons." You might call him:

- Generous
- Faithful
- Gracious

¹ Q 1, "The Heidelberg Catechism," in *The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part I*, 2007.

Nevertheless, the son preferred the “distant country” to the values of home. Do you continue to pursue the values of the distant country preferring them to the values of your God?

“About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything” (14-16).

As one person in our study said, “hunger makes you smarter.”

“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’ So he returned home to his father” (17-20a).

He has lived as if there is no need for home. But then he is awakened by consequences. He has no home to go to or meals on the table. The grass was no longer greener. What to do?

Sylvia Glover, of Brooklyn, New York grew up in a home with a lot of criticism. She never felt love from her father. She didn’t know who she was. She ran away as a teen, became involved in drugs and alcohol, became the life of the party—telling jokes, drinking, and dancing all night. Even so, her boss befriended her, which she couldn’t believe because the woman went to church and talked about praising the Lord. *Praise the Lord, what was that? Why is this woman my friend? I spent the weekend with my boyfriend, the drug dealer. I needed drugs. What kind of drug was she on?* But then Sylvia’s boyfriend broke up with her, she became so high on drugs she feared for her life, she felt a deep desire to get out of her circumstances. She was searching for love and security and a different identity, and finally began to look for it in another place.²

So the younger son says to himself, “I’ve got to go home. I’ve got to return to my roots. But he’s got this wall he’s built between him and family at home. So he turns it over and over in his mind, repeating it again and again. How do you repair these bridges that have been burnt? It consumes him. He’s walking, thinking, talking to himself, mulling and hoping. *Home, home, home.*

Jesus is like the prodigal, in a way. He left his home—not to reject his home, but to travel into that “distant country” where we live in order to “hang out with sinners” and “seek and to save that which is lost.” He came here to be that bridge across the broken boundary between me and my heavenly Father. He came to say to me and you—I’m your home,” clinging to Me and your heavenly Father—that will give you that real sense of belonging and love and worthiness. Jesus came to say that to you, and to your children and parents and friends.

Kind of like Scarlett O’Hara when life hit her really hard. She’d lost her husband, she’d lost her purpose, she’d lost her child, and she didn’t know where to turn. She’d alienated all her friends. She was alone. Where do you turn? She hears her father’s voice in her head. “It’s home, Scarlett.

² Sylvia Glover testimony, <http://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/media/videos>, accessed May 6, 2015.

It's your roots, from which you get your strength." So she said to herself, "I'll go home. Tomorrow is another day." She had the hope of life.

Home is more than just a place. So we make our way back, though we are sometimes ravaged by losses. Are you heading back to your true home? The young man is returning to the hope of life. He is heading "home," in full reality and determination to stay. Are you walking with him?

That's where we leave him until next week.

AMEN

