

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 6, 2016  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, IA  
Rev. Amy Larson  
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32- Parable of the Prodigal Son  
2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:16-21

[click here to read scriptures for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The younger son is living far from home, among the pigs, in the mud, when he comes to himself, or as some translations say, he comes to his senses.

This year, that was the phrase that caught my attention - he came to his senses - because our Lenten theme is coming to our senses, returning to God.

I got to reflecting on that moment in this story and wondering what role God plays in us coming to our senses.

- The father in this story isn't involved in his son coming to himself.
- The father doesn't go out looking for his son, he doesn't search him out, get into the mud with him, grab him and shake some sense into him.
- The father just waits for the son to make it home.

I get that when I think about earthly relationships. If a loved one leaves and doesn't want to be found you have no choice but to wait and long and pray for them to come back to you.

But as a parable about God I got to wondering what it says about God that this father doesn't go out searching for his son, doesn't try to help his son get home.

Sure, the father runs to greet his son once he's in sight, but his son has to go it alone until that point.

The father welcomes his son profusely, and doesn't even let him apologize first, once his son gets home, but his son has to make it home first.

So we learn from the parable that God welcomes us home and rejoices over us and doesn't condemn us.

But where is God when we haven't come to our senses, when we're stuck in the mud, far away from God, when we move through each day unaware of God's presence?

Where is God when we're not living in God's ways of righteousness, mercy and kindness for ourselves and others?

Where is God when we've decided we'll just go it alone and don't need God?

Is God just waiting 'til we can get it all together and come home?

This got me to thinking about a family friend, Margaret, who became estranged from her son Michael when he was a teenager.

As in all human relationships, both Margaret and Michael played a role in the pain and separation between them.

Margaret knows where Michael lives, she even has his phone number, but she hasn't talked to him for 26 years now.

This summer when I was with Margaret she told me why she hasn't reached out to Michael after all these years and she used this Bible story as her justification.

She said, the Prodigal Son was, "morally responsible by coming crawling back to the father on his knees and then the father welcomed him."

I pointed out that the father embraced the son before he even had a chance to apologize but Margaret insisted, "the Son approached the Father first"

Margaret is certainly stuck in some bitterness and anger, but what about the point she makes?

The son in the story does make the first move.

Is that how it is for us?

Do we have to go it alone until we're within shouting distance?

Does Margaret have to get out of that bitterness and anger on her own?

Or will God help her to come to her senses, will God help us?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is so influential in the way we see God. It is one of the most loved, most famous stories in the Bible and it gives us a wonderful image of God's forgiveness.

But if it's our only picture of who God is and how God works, we miss out on the fullness of God and God's grace.

If we focus only on the welcoming, rejoicing God, we may start to think that God's grace is only at work in those times when we come home.

If the welcoming, rejoicing God is our only image of God, we might not see that God's grace is also at work for us in those dead, down, stuck in the mud times.

That's why we who hear and tell this story need to remember it like Jesus tells it.

When Jesus tells this parable of the prodigal son, he actually tells three parables all at once that together help flesh out who God is and how God works.

These parables together make up the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke.

First he tells about the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go out and look for one lost sheep, a shepherd who goes out into the mud to bring home the lost.

Then Jesus tells about a woman who loses a coin and gets down on her hands and knees and crawls around in the dirt to find that lost treasure. And then, after emphasizing how God goes out and searches and finds, then Jesus gives us the beautiful story of the rejoicing Father.

These three parables together give us a fuller picture of God and God's grace, a picture that is just astonishingly good news.

Listen to the amazement in Søren Kierkegaard's writing as his understanding of God is opened up by reading these three parables together. He writes:

"When it is a question of a sinner God does not merely stand still, open his arms and say, 'Come hither', no, He stands there and waits, as the father of the lost son waited, rather He does not stand and wait, He goes forth to seek, as the shepherd sought the lost sheep, as the woman sought the lost coin. He goes, yet no, He has gone, but infinitely farther than any shepherd or any woman, He went, in truth, the infinitely long way from being God to becoming man, and that way He went in search of sinners."

Yes, God is like a waiting, welcoming, rejoicing parent but God is also like a shepherd looking for a sheep, a woman looking for a lost coin. God, in Jesus, became flesh to go out into world, into the mud, to find us and be with us and call us home.

God's Spirit is at loose in the world, as close to us as each breath we take.

God is at work through all of creation and through the gift of our physical senses to help us to be aware of God's presence.

God is also at work through us and through others to do the ministry of reconciliation with God, as we heard in the reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians.

God uses others in our lives to bring us to our senses and to call us home.

And God does the same through us for the sake of other people.

We don't have to come to our senses on our own, we don't have to come home again on our own - in fact we can't.

God is at work in every turning point that leads us home.

Let's take a few moments to simply rest in God, our home.

Amen.