

## SERMON: "The Home Stretch"

First United Church, Waterloo

LENT III

Sunday, March 20, 2022

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*PRAYER: "God, keep calling to us, keep running to regather us. By your Word and by your Spirit, find us, lift us up, take us with you, and embrace us. Abide with us, and we with you, that we may follow in the way of Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen"*

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It's the bottom of the ninth inning. The bases are loaded.  
The opposing team is ahead by three runs and your team already has two out.  
It is not Casey who is at the bat, but you or me. We already have two strikes against us.  
Here comes the pitch. We swing. .... We miss. But ... there is no umpire!  
The catcher throws the ball back to the pitcher.  
The pitcher keeps hurling the ball back at us until ... until ... until ...  
Why, it's almost unbelievable! This pitcher really wants us to hit that home run!  
The atmosphere is supersaturated with encouragement.  
For a moment the pitcher turns to check the base-runners.  
We glimpse the back of his sweater and there are the three letters: G-O-D.  
Maybe now we get it. God's pitching is a constant gift of grace and mercy.  
God will not quit until we do slam that ball into the stands and bring those other runners in.  
We manage to make solid contact and the ball sails away.  
As we round third base, the catcher is waving us in too, welcoming us home.

In the course of our journeys of faith it is always worthwhile to check our homing devices.  
If we get some fix on how we have gone off-course,  
we will have some ideas about what we need to do to redirect our steps.  
Then our lives and our world can both head towards getting back on a right track.  
A turning point comes when we realize that we already have all we need to get out of our slump.  
Lent is that kind of time, like spring training through the end of winter:  
time to get the rust out and find our groove again.

### I TOO FAR OUT

The wayward son in Jesus familiar parable may have found that key when he hit bottom.  
Chomping on pea pods and food scraps in a pigs' trough *"he came to his senses"*.  
Perhaps it was a moment of true conversion and repentance.  
More likely it was just his usual self-serving logic kicking in again.  
*"Wait a minute! What am I going eating swine swill?  
Back home at Dad's estate, there's ample food and shelter.  
If I just go back and say, 'I'm sorry', I'm sure my old man will take me back again."*  
He was right, but he was not prepared to be overwhelmed.  
United Church author and publisher Jim Taylor put this take on it:  
*"(That younger son) had probably been difficult for years.  
The behaviour patterns he betrayed in that far country didn't start when he left home."*

*Probably he skipped school, blew his allowance, worked as little as possible, chased women, got plastered, partied lots, and generally gave his parents a lot of grey hair. There was probably a great sigh of relief in the household when he finally did move out, even if he took a large chunk of his bank account and inheritance with him. And yet, knowing all that, when the father saw the boy coming back, he raced out and embraced his son. Without any evidence that things had changed, even before his son could ask for forgiveness (if only half-sincerely), the father welcomed him home ... (and ordered up a big party).”* 1  
How could he do that?

It isn't always the children who go astray, we could tell tales of prodigal parents as well. Numbers of people of faith and people of no faith have known this experience. They have wandered too far out, lost their way, and maybe even squandered their wad in loose and reckless living. Perhaps some of us have too. Then comes that hit bottom moment, we journey into ourselves and come to our senses, and with faltering steps we make that U-turn that is like heading back home. But we may not be prepared to be overwhelmed by amazing grace and love. We make the return journey shaking in our boots, and in the home stretch, God comes running to us and supercedes our most meagre expectations. God comes gushing over with grace and transforming love and finds cause for rejoicing. Words of apology or remorse trail off into silence before they are finished being uttered. God already knows. Just fall into God's arms and melt, and catch the smell of beef on the Bar-B.

## II TOO FAR IN

Others of us don't bottom out, but we also get lost and stuck like that other elder brother in the parable. We hang around home-base, play life by the rules, and feel duty-bound to be faithful. We stress and strain to be the “perfect” child. We will do everything we can and then some just to please, an incarnation of righteousness. And all we crave is a pat on the back, a little recognition from a parent or a God who really appreciates our efforts, who tells us, “Yes, I really, really love you.” So, yes, you can bet your sweet bippy (an old-fashioned term that dates us) we get ticked whenever some wastrel child returns, gets taken in, and has a party thrown in his or her honour! Not fair! All that extravagance and gushing-over grace for a ne'er-do-well! So while you all chow down on roast fatted calf, we'll just have a cow of our own out here. Excuse us, but we do feel royally bummed out and cheated. *“All these years I have slaved for you ... and you have never given me anything even closely resembling a party!” (Luke 15:29)*

There we are stuck out in the pasture, our boots sunk well over the ankle mark in the muck and manure of our own bitterness, resentment, and sense of entitlement. We too are lost because we've wandered too far in. Listen to the language:

*"All these years I have slaved for you ..."* --

an offspring whose self-image is that of a servant, not a son or a daughter!

*"But this son of yours comes back ..."* --

Your renegade child, Daddy, but he's no brother of mine! I've never liked him!

The way home for those who have wandered too far in is also to snap out of it.

*"You are always here, and everything I have is yours."* (Luke 15:31)

Both brothers in the parable got their inheritance early.

Technically, the one who stayed home didn't just help run the farm, he now owned it.

His parents were now his tenants, his dependants.

Yet his already good-as-dead father invites him to share

in the joy of celebrating full family reunion. How could he do that?

One woman's reaction to this outrageous story runs like this:

*"I am the elder sister out of two. I am the one caught up in the work ethic.*

*I am the one who doesn't find it easy to accept undeserved gifts.*

*Could it be that the journey is easier for the prodigal?*

*Nonetheless, I also hear God's voice calling, 'Come to the Party!*

*Come celebrate life and community!'*

*I just have to come in from the field. Perhaps that is my Lenten journey."* 2

Hey there all of us loyal church-goers who've been active and present for years, who have never gone astray, there's news here.

A. We already have all God's love, joy, hope, forgiveness, grace – you name it – as blessings and gifts. B. These gifts are not just for us alone.

C. God's generosity and favour are inexhaustible and it isn't up to us to tell God how to spend or bestow them.

The most enjoyable, life-giving, and soul-enriching way of using and appreciating God's gifts is to share them just as liberally and flagrantly as God does.

The home stretch for us is to extend ourselves beyond the limits of sense and reason, showering love and acceptance and blessing and forgiveness upon the least and the last and the lost of this world.

Then we do a world of good. Then we do God proud. Then we live God's transforming love.

## CONCLUSION

Coming to ourselves is like checking our homing devices.

It is discovering how to turn our lives and hearts around to the God who calls all of us to come the Party of Abundant Life.

If we wander too far out, we must come to our senses, about face and make stuttering tracks back home.

If we wander too far in, we must snap and break free of our grudges and resentments,  
lift our mud-caked boots one at a time till we reach the back porch  
where we can kick them off and cross the thresh-hold into the familiar main house  
and rejoice in cutting loose with the rest of the reunited and vastly extended family.  
Either way, it's our move to make.  
The good news begins with the discovery that around us and within us  
we already have what it takes to make those U-turns  
that take us homeward bound and Godward bound again.  
And what we don't have ... will be given us ... wait for it. It will be given in super-abundance.

The field of life can be compared to a ball diamond.  
But, with God, the bottom of the ninth is not much different from the top of the first inning.  
With arms flung out tossing pitch after pitch after pitch,  
God is determined that everyone gets the rush of hitting a few homers right out of the park.  
Along the way, with endless at bats, everybody has countless chances to get on base  
with singles, doubles, or triples and to drive in some other runs.  
And every so often, everyone has the opportunity to author a grand slam.  
Everybody, even those who appear to be on some opposite team.  
Remember how Saint Paul once put it:

*"All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into friends  
and gave us the task of making others friends of God also." (II Corinthians 5:18)*

Somehow we realize that we're all playing in the same league.

We just happen to be the ones who wear the Jesus jerseys  
because through him we have seen a loving, compassionate God  
running with his robes held up, knobby knees a-flyin',  
eager to wrap holy arms around the lost, the excluded, the confused, and the rebellious  
AND ... around the self-absorbed mucky-mucks who forget how blessed they already are,  
(except they often have trouble sharing it).

Clergy have the joy of being like playing coaches and managers  
who week after week, time after time get to shout:

"Come on, team, let's get on out there and play ball!

Let's play like life's primarily one ongoing party of never-ending joy for everyone:  
where the upright and fallen both become restored;  
whether it's your day to be a player or a spectator or a ticket-seller or a peanut vendor;  
where it isn't about winning or losing or keeping score,  
it's about celebration and feeling blessed and loved, unconditionally loved."

What do say, are we game for that?

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1 Jim Taylor, *Currents*, (Wood Lake Books publication, Winfield, BC: December 1987).

2 Adapted from Adult Study Pak, *The Whole People of God*, (Wood Lake Books, Winfield, BC: Unit 5, Week 24, page V-24, 1995 edition).

