

STORYTIME:
The One About Being Lost At Home

Luke 15:25-32

*There is a little of the younger son in all of us,
and there is a lot of the older brother in most of us.*

A sermon preached by
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There is a great desire among people in our contemporary world to do things from home. We like to do things from the comfort of our own space—in our chair or in our pajamas—that we used to have to leave home to do. Of course, we can communicate with anyone anywhere from home. Through a computer or smartphone, we can text, talk, or appear by video to anyone on the planet who is similarly equipped.

More and more people are working from home. Over 5% of the current U. S. workforce works totally from home. That's over 8 million people. But 70% of the workforce works remotely, from home or some other place, at least once a week.¹

And everybody seems to be shopping from home. I remember when that meant ordering from the Sears catalog. While only 10% of total retail purchases are made online, 69% of American adults say they have purchased something over the internet.²

So we can communicate, work, and shop from home. The question for us today is, can we be lost at home? Can we experience brokenness, alienation, anxiety, and dysfunction even in the place we live and look to for security?

My late friend and colleague Roger Beal used to tell about a childhood incident that happened when he was about eight years old. Roger's dad was also a Methodist preacher, and I don't know what was going on at the parsonage that day, but Roger decided he had endured all he could take. So he wrote his parents a note telling them that he couldn't stand it any more, and he ran away. But he didn't run far. He rode his bicycle around his house and hid it behind the garage, then he went upstairs and hid in a closet. He was lost, but he never left home. Meanwhile, his parents frantically searched all over town, only to find Roger at home when they returned.

So yes, you can even get lost at home. The older brother in the parable of the prodigal son (which I prefer to call the parable of the waiting father) was lost at home. There are two lost boys in the story. You may remember from last week (or you know the story) that the younger son asked for his inheritance early and went away to squander his father's money on dissolute living. He made a total mess of his life, but he finally realized he would be much better off as one of his father's hired hands. So he came home, and

his father, who had been dishonored by the younger son's conduct, came running out to meet him. The young man tried to give his repentance speech, but the father wouldn't hear it. Instead he called for a robe to be brought, a ring to go on his finger, and shoes for his feet. Then the father called for the fattened calf to be slaughtered to make a feast, which meant this was a community celebration. Cue the musicians; cue the dancers; let the party begin!

Therein lay the problem. The older son, who had been at work in the field, came home to hear the sounds of a celebration. He asked one of the slaves what was going on, and the slave said, "Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he is home safe and sound."

This infuriated the older brother, and he refused to go in to the party. So the father came out to him and pleaded with him to come inside. But the older son was adamant. "Listen, you!" (which is no way to talk to your father) "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me even a young goat to have a party with my friends. But then this *son of yours*" (not "my brother" or even "your son") "comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes," (Wait a minute. Nobody said anything about prostitutes. Where was the older brother's mind?) "you killed the fattened calf for him!"

So the father, who was now being dishonored and embarrassed by the older son, responded. He could have responded in anger: "Fine! Have it your way! See if I care!" Or he could have responded with authority: "I am still your father, and you are still my son, and you get your self in that house right now, young man!" But amazingly, he responded with grace: "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours" (not "my son" but "your brother") "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."³

And now we wait. What is the older brother going to do? Will he go in? Will he turn and stomp away? Jesus never says! That's the end of the story! We're left hanging on a cliff, while Jesus goes on to the next parable.

I've never preached a whole sermon just on the older brother. The younger one is so much more interesting. Much more of a feel-good ending. Much easier to find stories about prodigals who have returned. But Act 2 of the parable, the older son, is much more personal and challenging. There's a little bit of prodigal in each of us, but there's a whole lot of older brother in most of us.

Dr. Fred Craddock, when he was teaching preaching at Candler School of Theology, was often asked to teach at churches in the Atlanta area. One time he was teaching in a Sunday School class in a local church, and they were studying the parable of the prodigal son. Just for fun, Fred decided to tell the story a little differently. He said, "You all know how this story goes. It's about a young man who demanded an inheritance from his father, went off and squandered it all, then wanted to come home. The father, upon seeing the son returning, said to him, 'I'm sorry, son, but you made your bed, now you must sleep in it. You can't come home.'"

At this point someone raised his hand and said, "Dr. Craddock, that's not how the story goes."

Immediately a woman piped up and said, "No, but it should be!" Older brothers come in all shapes and sizes.

So what's his problem? Why can't the older brother just go in to the party and be happy for his little brother, scoundrel that he is?

On the surface, it might just look like pride. The older brother has stayed at home and done the right thing and received very little reward or recognition for his righteousness. So he is just too proud to go in and give honor to his brother who frittered away his share of the inheritance, and now everybody acts like he's somebody special.

Or maybe his anger is envy disguised. Maybe deep down inside, the older brother wishes he had been the younger brother. What an adventure he must have had! The older brother can just imagine spending all that money on prostitutes, even though prostitutes had never been mentioned. Apparently his younger brother came through it all right. Maybe he was just jealous.

Certainly he was selfish. Ever since the younger brother left, everything on the family farm was coming to him as an inheritance. That also means every dime that was spent was money that was *not* going into his

inheritance. So the party expenses—musicians, dancers, food, drink—that was all on the older brother’s tab. All to celebrate a worthless brother.

Dr. Tim Keller, founder and pastor emeritus of Manhattan Presbyterian Church in New York City, does a masterful analysis of the older brother in his book *The Prodigal God*.⁴ He reminds us that both sons are lost, and that both sons have basically the same problem. They want to control their father and his things. The younger son seeks control by taking his share and running away. He does all the things that we recognize as sin. The older son seeks to control the father by doing all the right things, so that the father is obligated eventually to turn over his wealth to him. Neither son wanted the father; they just wanted his stuff.

People do that all the time with God, don’t they? On the one hand, we can seek to gain control by just turning away from God, breaking all the rules. This is my life; I will live it the way I want to. I’m large and in charge! That’s the younger son.

Or we can try to gain control by doing all the right things—be a good person, follow all the rules, pillar of church and community. But all we want is what we want—the approval of others, a good life that only comes to the righteous, the blessings of success, a place in heaven when we die. We deserve it; and God better give it. We don’t do all this religious stuff for nothing, do we?

This introduces a whole new category of brokenness and sin. Tim Keller writes:

“Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus, though, shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person. Why? Because sin is not just breaking the rules; it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge, just as each son sought to displace the authority of the father in his own life. ...There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course, and one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very good.”⁵

When we sin in an older brother kind of way, there is a syndrome of observable behaviors. We see them all in the parable. The older brother

carries a weight of anger and bitterness. He has a sense of superiority to his younger brother and probably to everyone else. He has an unforgiving, judgmental spirit toward those who have failed and fallen. His service to the father is joyless and fear-based, a compliance based on duty, not love. And the older brother has no assurance that what he is trying to manipulate is actually going to happen. He worries because the father never threw him a party. There is no security in the relationship.

So what is the answer? How can the younger brother and the older brother, both of whom are lost, be saved?

It starts with God's initiating love. This is the foundation of the story. This parable is not really even about the sons; it's about the father who loves and waits and celebrates when his children come home. If Jesus had been Methodist, he would have called it prevenient grace. First of all, and last of all, and everywhere in between, the father loves. God loves.

Love brings about repentance. God doesn't love us because we repent. We repent because God loves us unconditionally. But true repentance involves two movements. Keller says, "To find God, we must repent of the things we have done wrong. But if that is all you do, you may remain just an elder brother. To truly become Christians, we must also repent of the reasons we ever did anything right."⁶ Pharisees and older brothers can repent of their transgressions. But truly faithful Christians repent of the roots of our righteousness, because we know that even our goodness can be self-serving and manipulative. In the end, we want the reward not to matter. We just want God. We only want God.

But somebody has to pay. Forgiveness is not free. It's going to cost somebody something. For the one forgiven, grace is free and unmerited and wonderful. But it has to cost somebody something to make it available.

In the first two parables in Luke chapter 15, it is apparent where the cost lies. The shepherd has to go out and look for the lost sheep. The woman has to sweep the house to find the coin. Redemption takes work. Who goes out and looks for the lost son? How can the older brother find forgiveness?

Tim Keller says Jesus left a character out of his story. This would be the true older brother. The true brother would have left home and gone and looked for the prodigal son and brought him home to the father. The true

brother would have gone out and convinced the older brother to come inside to the party. Where was the true brother in the story?

Jesus left the true brother out of the story because the true brother was the one telling the story. Repentance is effective, and forgiveness is possible, because Jesus himself paid the price. He gave his life on the cross so that the younger sons and daughters could come home from the far country and feel the warm embrace of their heavenly Father. Jesus died so that the older brothers and sisters don't have to be cut out of the party. We don't have to live in anger and bitterness, unforgiving, judgmental, joyless and insecure. The price has been paid, and we who are dead can be made alive again. We who are lost can be found again. Keller says, "We will never stop being younger brothers or elder brothers until we acknowledge our need, rest by faith, and gaze in wonder at the work of our true elder brother, Jesus Christ."⁷

The parable of the two lost sons and the loving father is not some sentimental tale about being forgiven no matter what you do. It is a hard-hitting story about the offense of grace. Imagine the impact on the hard-core religious people who heard Jesus tell it. He just put it in their face, dropped it in their laps, and left them hanging. If this story makes you a little uncomfortable, it just means you're getting it.

For those of us who identify with the older brother today (and if you don't, that means you should), this story leaves us with a challenge: Repent. Repent both ways, both for the wrong things you have done, but also for all the wrong reasons you have done good things. And sin no more.

This story also gives us hope, because nothing is more fundamental and eternal than the love of God. God loves all God's sons and daughters, younger, older and in between. When we are still far away, God will come out to us, and God will be generous with all of us. We can count on that.

The story is open-ended. We don't know what the older brother does. Does he go in? Does he go away? We don't know. But we know that we have a choice, too. It's not just a choice; it's a series of choices, a process, if you will. Every day we can decide not to run away from God, not to try to be the lord of our own life. We can let God be Lord. Every day, we can decide not to run to God only to assure our benefits, but to run to God just

because God is God, and we love God, and we want to gaze in wonder at what God has done for us.

That is when we will truly be at home.

¹ <https://qz.com/work/1392302/more-than-5-of-americans-now-work-from-home-new-statistics-show/>, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/30/70-percent-of-people-globally-work-remotely-at-least-once-a-week-iwg-study.html>.

² <https://learn.g2.com/online-shopping-statistics>.

³ Luke 15:25-32, paraphrased.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God; Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (London: Penguin, 2008).

⁵ Keller, p. 43, 44.

⁶ Keller, 77f.

⁷ Keller, 86.