

Homecoming - Part 2

Luke 15: 11 – 31

Wasn't last weekend a lot of fun? I hope you were able to participate in some of the many wonderful activities that were held in and around the church:

The hearty and delicious farmer's breakfast

The children's pet academy

The pet show, featuring nearly two dozen pets including a bearded dragon and a highland heifer calf!

The arts and crafts workshop directed by Betinna, the owner of Finds and Designs and Brett Favre's cousin – Go Pack!

The water baptism service in which we were privileged to witness 6 born-again believers publicly profess their faith in Jesus and desire to follow Him.

Children played lawn games that were so entertaining, they didn't even get to the raw egg toss or gunny sack races!

The ice cream social was a big hit even if the pastor forgot to bring the toppings!

And of course, the square dancing was a barrel of fun - you should have seen the teenagers, the Kilvers, and Miss Beth. They were really whooping it up and dancing in the street!

And what more can be said about last Sunday's worship service, honoring Pastor Larry for his faithful and tireless service to God and FCC for over a quarter of a century?

His message that homecoming is about remembering, relationships, and looking forward to our future with God, who is our Savior and King was simply icing on the cake.

And shame on me if I forget to mention the amazing potluck luncheon that followed. I think we had enough food there to feed the entire population of Lapeer County!

I, for one, am glad I didn't miss a moment. How about you?

And because of the flurry of activities, it went by quickly. I started out the morning eating pancakes, and before I knew it, it was dark and I found myself watering the church lawn with water from livestock tank.

Which brings me to a very important point:

Much planning and effort went into last weekend – both on the day and many days beforehand. Let me give you some examples:

All the food for the pancake breakfast had to be purchased, stored, prepared, and served.

All the pots and pans and silverware had to be washed, dried and put away.

The chairs and tables and decorations had to be set up and taken down.

The church grounds had to be mowed and edged and weeded and prepped before the mulch could be transported and spread out.

The bushes had to be pruned. New plants were planted.

Tents and canopies had to be delivered and set up and then taken down.

The secretaries had to go through the archives to locate, organize and copy pages of church records of baptisms, weddings and pastors along with their years of service.

Games had to be designed and set up.

A flat bed wagon and livestock tank had to be procured, delivered, cleaned up and filled.

All the Hyped band music and audio equipment had to be transported and set up and later torn down.

Banners, newspaper articles, invitations and advertisements had to be ordered, printed, and distributed.

Church records, documents and other items had to be collected and organized for the time capsule which will be opened 50 years from now. Mark your calendars!

Tons of food had to be prepared, delivered, and served for the potluck luncheon.

Prizes had to be ordered, purchased and handed out at the different events.

Forgive me, but I'm sure I'm forgetting other things that occurred, but I think you're getting the picture:

Successful events like this don't happen spontaneously – or at the last moment. There needs to be planning, organizing, designing and lots of hard work long before the day of the event.

And truth be told, in the grand scheme of things, this wasn't even a very large event – maybe 500 hundred people attended if you include Sunday morning worship attendance which is a small percentage of the people who live in the area.

And yet, **what took place here was very important:**

People connected with people.

Old acquaintances were renewed.

New relationships were formed.

Current relationships were strengthened - not only between people but also between God and people and the church with the community.

Overall, I believe Almont Homecoming weekend at FCC was a big success – and this wouldn't have been true had it not been for all of you and all the giving and donating of your time and resources and energy - the planning and prayer and preparation and work of so many.

And we're not done yet:

There are new connections to follow up on.

New Christians to teach and strengthen.

New workers to recruit for the ministries this Fall, not to mention all the other stuff that goes on around here on a regular basis just to make sure our Sunday worship service goes off like clockwork.

Now didn't this speech sound like some debriefing session?

Acknowledge the participants, especially those behind the scenes that pulled off said event? I admit it. It sounds like that to me. And I should know. I wrote it! No thanks to Chat GPT!

So, here's the thing I want to share with you this morning - and I'm going to use Jesus' parable of the lost son as my text to point it out to you:

If we are not careful, we, as a church, could be in danger!

If we do not stay vigilant and prayerful and humble, we, as God's people could be susceptible to something that occurred in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

And I want us to be aware of it so that we do not become infected with this thing that can do serious harm to our relationship with God and could cloud our vision as to who God is - and I'll tell you what it is in a moment but first let us review Jesus' parable of the Lost Son or as it is more commonly recognized: The Prodigal Son.

Everybody here pretty much knows the parable of the lost son AKA the Prodigal Son, right? Still, I'll briefly summarize so we don't miss out on any of the important details. But before I do this, let me back up and set the stage for why Jesus told this parable in the first place.

As it turns out, Jesus has excellent hearing – or maybe he has an exceptional talent for reading lips. Whatever the case, Jesus happens to catch the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttering among themselves or to themselves about the quality of company Jesus keeps. Luke writes this in 15:2, *“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”*

Now when you think about it, I think we can agree that their criticism does not lie so much in their judgment of the people themselves - they are surrounded with those sorts of people every day even though they probably tried their best to keep it to a minimum.

Their criticism has more to do with Jesus himself. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law are probably not very concerned about the general public at all, let alone the sinners and tax collectors.

What sticks in their craw is that Jesus who is supposed to be one of them - holy and pious and above the worldly concerns of the commoner - has chosen to hang out with those sorts of people rather than with them. In other words, Jesus has betrayed the fraternity – the brotherhood of the religious who are called by God to live on a higher plane.

But what they don't understand is that Jesus is doing exactly this. He is living a deeply spiritual and holy life which in turn compels him to rub shoulders with sinners. Because in doing so, he is offering something that they need so desperately even though many of them may not yet realize it. And what they're missing is called grace and mercy and forgiveness and love and hope and Jesus is bringing it to them incarnationally – in other words, through his very person.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law are mad at Jesus because he's showing them how to do their job and how to live an authentic and holy life, and they don't like it. As Jesus lives out his life in front of them, they cannot help but be convicted of their sin and shortcomings.

This is the setting that prompts Jesus to tell the story of the Prodigal Son.

And even before Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son – probably the most famous parable in all the Bible – Jesus shares two other parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep and another one about a lost coin. The moral of these two stories is very much the same: God is extremely concerned about those who are lost, who need to be found and returned home.

In the Lost Coin parable, a woman has ten coins but loses one. She basically turns her house upside down and inside out searching for it and doesn't rest until that one coin is found. And when she finally does find it, she calls her neighbors to celebrate with her. Jesus concludes this story by saying that *"there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Likewise, in the lost sheep parable, we see the great concern and anxiety the shepherd has for his one lost animal. So much so, that he is willing to leave the 99 and strike out to search for the single lost one. I guess the shepherd figured that there is strength in numbers, but the single one, all alone had no hope of surviving without his help.

And in this story too, we learn that the searcher meets with success. The woman finds her lost coin and the shepherd finds his stray charge. And a party ensues! There's a happy ending. We love happy endings. And we like parties too, don't we - when we get together and celebrate another's success.

But if we don't like things of this nature, then we'd better ask why. If we have a problem seeing others come to God and being restored or if we hear about someone really taking off in their faith and reaching new heights in their faith because they've begun to read their Bible

and pray and serve – then we'd better figure out where we left the tracks.

So, all this stuff has led up to Jesus finally sharing the story of the Prodigal Son, and like a masterful professional boxer, Jesus keeps us jabbing us with the truth from one hand while all the while waiting for the perfect opportunity to bring in the deadly right hook.

Remember the Rope – a – Dope that made Mohammed Ali so famous? Well, I think Ali stole this strategy from Jesus. Right when we thought we knew the outcome of the story, Pow! And we didn't even see it coming!

You see, we know the flow and sequence of the Prodigal Son's story:

- 1 A father has two sons.
- 2 The younger son decides he wants to cash in his inheritance early. Maybe he decides to do this because he has an older brother who, according to tradition, will get twice what he gets. And so, he doesn't see the value of waiting around for it. Besides, he probably doesn't feel the obligation to help his father as much as the older brother probably feels. So, he thinks he has a golden opportunity to fly the coop.
- 3 The Father grants the younger son's request which is a little surprising since typically an inheritance isn't distributed until the father's death.
- 4 The young son leaves and embraces a wild and immoral lifestyle which leads to financial ruin.
- 5 After hiring himself out to do those most menial and embarrassing job a Jew could do - feeding swine – he comes to his senses.

- 6 He decides to go back to his father and beg forgiveness. He thinks that maybe his father will have compassion on him and let him return – maybe not as a son but at least as a hired hand.
- 7 Of course, we know what happens. It is a grand homecoming celebration. Upon seeing his son, the father runs to him, wraps his arms around him, and gives him full rights as a son as symbolized by the robe and jewelry, the sandals and the party. For the father thought his son was dead, but instead he is alive! The father thought his son was lost, but instead, he is found!
- 8 The end. Let's party!

Not quite. Did you see it? Did you see the danger we could be in?

You see, all the things that Jesus just said about the prodigal son is just Ali's left jab. Now here comes the knock- out punch.

You Pharisees and teachers of the law: You guys are the older brother! You are the one who is angered and mad that your little brother returned! You were hoping and wishing you would never see your brother again! You were hoping he got drunk and got beat up in some back alley left to die because he deserved it. He just took his dad's hard-earned money and squandered it and made a mockery of the family name.

And yet, when he returns, the father welcomes him back with open arms even after all the sinning.

What's the danger, you ask?

It's us in the church acting like the older brother and believing that somehow if we're just a little more diligent and little more faithful, and work a little harder, that somehow, we'll be a little more deserving of God's blessings and love and forgiveness – that somehow, we deserve more of what God has to offer because we've been so faithful in serving him.

You see, there's as much danger in getting lost in a distant land and not finding your way home as there is getting lost right at home thinking that God owes you something more or extra because you spent all Saturday afternoon cleaning up for your younger brother who happened to show up unannounced to the party, and maybe he even thought about coming back to church because he's felt the emptiness inside and has sensed the distance he is from God and is hoping that all can change.

I know that if you've been in church a long time it's difficult to watch others tramp on traditions and have a cavalier attitude about things that you regard as sacred.

Believe me, those feelings are real. I've struggled with them myself on numerous occasions. But what really helps me get refocused on what's truly important in life is to re-read the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and once again take an upper cut to the chin and be reminded that the church's great mission is to welcome home sinners.

For we were all the younger son. Let us not become the older. At least, let us not adopt his attitude of entitlement.

1 Corinthians 1: 26 – 30 says, *“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.”*

Amen.