

**Going Home**  
Mark Siler  
Luke 15:11-32  
March 10, 2013

Hillary Brownsmith, Tamara Puffer, and I participate in Homeward Bound's Hope to Home program. Rachel Rasmussen helps coordinate it. This means we accompany someone trying to make the transition from living on the streets to living in an apartment.

Recently, over a plate of eggs and grits at Waffle House, this new friend began to tell me how difficult this transition has been. He wondered aloud if apartment living is for him. He often feels bound by the rules and regulations, more and more alone by the distance between his place and his community.

While frequently interjecting a deep gratitude for Homeward Bound and the Hope to Home program, he sheepishly confessed to feeling somewhat happier on the streets. There, he saw his friends every day. After years of homelessness, he also had something of a ministry, though he would not call it that. He is known for supporting others living on the streets, others trying to make it, trying to find their way – a ministry indeed.

Perhaps my friend's journey carries a similar twist to the one we find in our parable today, the kind of twist that turns us around and asks us to see something that's been there all along. It's important to recognize to whom Jesus is telling this story of the Prodigal Son and to what accusation he is responding. The Pharisees and the Scribes are grumbling again, and they accuse Jesus of welcoming and eating with sinners.

In classic Jesus form, he launches into the three "lost parables"—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and finally the lost sons. Notice the plural. I'd argue that if Jesus got to name it, he would call it the Parable of the Lost Sons. As we typically tell it, the older son tends to get missed next to the dramatic return of the younger. But given Jesus' audience, I think it's the older son that's at the heart of it.

Jesus is telling this story to the Pharisees and Scribes, the well-meaning religious faithful who, because the status quo is working, at least on a surface level, feel threatened by Jesus' radical hospitality and love, which turn everything upside down. Of the gospel characters, it is probably the Pharisees that most resemble us here at Circle of Mercy. This parable is for us. Jesus wants us to understand how the older son is lost because, given our place in the world, it is how we can easily become lost, too.

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The older son and my Hope to Home partner have something in common. They are facing the difference between being houseless and being homeless. My friend now has a house but, in some way, he feels less at home than when he was homeless. Similarly, the older son in our story has a house—a nice house with every material thing he needs—but he is not at home.

He is struggling to participate in the home that God creates for us all, the home that Jesus is always calling us to enter: a home where we swim in the joy of unearned grace, a home where mercy trumps resentment and fear, a home where we are able to participate in the natural flow of giving and receiving that lie at the heart of creation's dance, a home where we are able to show up to God's banquet, God's abundance. It's important to know that at the end of each of the lost stories, Jesus talks about rejoicing. He talks about a feast. And, he reveals how hard it is for the older brother, for the Pharisees, and perhaps for us to join that kind of homecoming party.

Increasingly, I believe that the faithful task before us, in our particular moment of history, in our position of global privilege, is to go home, to return to full participation in creation. Creation is crying out to us, "You are an intimate part of all this. Please stop living as if you are not." Climate change is one sign among many that we have forgotten how to be at home on this planet, how to participate in the natural rhythms that surround us.

Our relationship with Cuba, like so many relationships with those struggling to meet basic needs, also exposes another way that we are out of rhythm. We come face to face with an inequity that, like climate change, reveals another shade of our collective homelessness. And in the same moment, our Cuban friends—and all our friends who know the struggle—show us again and again that our individualism is a destructive lie. We are created by and for community. In that way, they have so much to bring to our homecoming party.

One of the amazing aspects of the modern North American church for me is that we have abandoned Sabbath—this powerful corrective for the human tendency to live apart from what God intends, to choose homelessness instead of participation. It's almost as if this fundamental practice of our faith tradition never existed. But it's all right there, from the great story's beginning.

As soon as God delivers the Jews from Pharaoh's domination, God gives them Sabbath. It is the alternative. It is the way to avoid the subtle slip toward separation, toward homelessness. In it, we find the radical redistribution of Jubilee. In it, we find the refrain "Just take the manna you need. If you take more than that, it will rot, you will rot, community will rot, creation will rot."

In Sabbath, we find this one full day a week set aside for remembering. It's the day when we take in God's glorious proclamations: "This is not just about you. You will not produce and earn your way to peace and salvation. The peace, the joy, the beauty, the love, the 'enough' are already here. I created it for you and for all. So take this day and remember this. Take this day and rest, notice, pray, play, delight, participate in community, in creation. Be at home because you already are."

The text does not tell us whether or not the older brother finally joined the party. Our Hope to Home team doesn't know where our partner is going. I pray that they are heading toward home, with or without their own house, and that we can join them. Amen.