

- Often, the new year is kind of like this.
- We come to conclusion that we need to lose that weight that mysteriously appeared over the last 11 months since we broke our last New Year's resolution. (I just don't know how this happened).
- We tell ourselves that we will try harder, do better and accomplish more. We will be less worried, more relaxed, less driven.
- This whole process can be incredibly energizing, as you could see new possibilities, a renewed enthusiasm for things, etc.
- This entire process can also be utterly depressing and overwhelming, especially as a person gets older and the years go by quicker and you wonder why nothing seems to change. It can feel like you are stuck where you are and like you are.
- It really doesn't matter which end of the spectrum you belong to, at some level there is often a desire to want to get back to home, to something, to someone, some behavior that you feel is a better place than you are or have been.
- We are going to spend the next three weeks looking at the same bible story.
- The reason is that many of you want to *do* more or *be* better in the year ahead. You will resolve to be better parents and spouses. You will try harder to pray and read your bibles.
- But unless our direction is the right one, the desires, choices, goals or resolutions that we have can actually lead us further from home and not in the direction we would like to go.

*Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

- His audience includes the "tax collectors and sinners" who are listening and hanging onto his every word.
- It includes the "Pharisees and the teachers of the law" also listening to what he says.
- He has their attention and he tells them a parable.
- Parables are stories. They are not real. They are made up. Stories that drive home a point.
- He tells a parable that is one of the two most famous stories in all the Bible and one that has influenced the world for 2000 years.
- He begins the story like this:  
11 *"There was a man who had two sons.*
- Throughout the middle ages and into the Renaissance this story inspired some of the most famous painters, including Rembrandt.
- It was the subject of many plays, ballets and operas.
- To this day, it is the subject of much music, with songs by Iron Maiden, the Rolling Stones, current bands that I have never even heard of (not to mention many Christian bands and artists).
- It has books written about it and poems penned. It could be argued that it is one of the most influential stories in history.
- You probably know what the story is – the Prodigal Son.
- Ironically, the word Prodigal is never used in the story, it is a term that was added to describe the story by scholars – a term that means "wasteful."
- 11 *"There was a man who had two sons.*
- There are three players in the story. Son #1. Son #2. The Father.
- For the next three weeks we are going to examine the three characters in this story.
- Each one of them can give us insight about ourselves.
- You might identify with one character more than another, but I think there is a bit of them in all of us.

- The main idea for this three weeks is this: **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- It doesn't matter if you are the younger son who has tried to find satisfaction and joy in things other than God and ended up broken and destitute. The Father is running to bring you home.
- It doesn't matter if you are the older son who has tried to dutifully follow the rules and ends up feeling tired and ignored. The father is coming out of the party to invite you in.
- The Father is the hero of this story and he perfectly, with great affection and joy, moves towards us and invites us to come to him. To return from the other country. To come in from the cold. To enjoy being sons and daughters with an unshakeable inheritance and life.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.** How do I move towards him? Should I move towards him.
- Today, let's look at the younger son.

*12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

- There are two parts to this story. Leaving home and returning home.
- Home is the place where our Father is, where the one who loves us calls us his own. We can leave it. We can return to it. Both are a choice. Let's examine both. How do I leave home? What does it look like? Is it a one time thing?

## **I. I can choose to leave home.**

- How would we describe the younger son and what he did?
- He asks for his inheritance long before he should have it. If you've heard people teach on this parable before, you know that this was the ultimate insult. By asking for his inheritance and the freedom to use it now how he wants, he is essentially wishing his father dead.
- This is hurtful, offensive and radically opposite of all traditions of the day. It is an arrogant, self-absorbed and willful request. He is uncaring of others and is shirking his responsibility. There is a defiant rebellion at play here.
- It is not just in his family, but with the community. He is burning his bridges as he leaves. His actions alienated the extended family, neighbors, friends and village.
- We simply cannot understand the depths of this betrayal the way Jesus' original audience (and much of the world today) would get it. We don't get it because we actually celebrate this in our culture. ("Go and find yourself. Figure yourself out.")
- Going to a "distant country" is not simply sowing his oats or sightseeing. It is a rejection of his family, his identity, his origin. All the values of family and community he had been raised with were thrown aside. All the ways of thinking, acting, and living that have been handed down are rejected.

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him . . . ' 22 the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

- Did you ever think, "why?" What was he looking for? Was it freedom? Was it adventure? What did he think he would get in this pursuit that he wasn't getting at home?
- This younger son left what he had for something "else." What was "out there" promised something better than he could get at home from his father.

## A. I leave home when I pursue fulfillment in things other than God.

- There is a searching for something else. Someone else. Something he did not think he could get at home.
- He left the voice of a father who loved him deeply and listened instead to the other voices.
- You know which ones I am talking about.
- The voices that reach into those inner places where you question your own goodness and doubt your self-worth.
- The voices that tell you you're missing out on all the fun. That you will be more fulfilled when you are free from the rules. That tell you doing anything you want when you want will bring happiness.
- Or they are the voices that say: "Show me you're a good boy. How are your grades? What are your connections? Don't show weakness – others will use you. If you stop producing, people will lose interest in you. Have you made all the arrangements for your old age?"
- What happens is that these little suggestions (sometimes innocent) can easily start dominating my life and pull me into the "distant country" when I forget whose voice matters.
- *"I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that called me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire."* (The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen, p40)
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME** but whenever I do this, I end up leaving my true home and looking far and wide to find one.

## B. I leave home when I seek for an identity in what cannot give it.

- It was not good enough to be the younger son. He wanted more. He wanted friends. He wanted to be seen a certain way. His identity was wrapped up in the opinions of others and in what he could achieve on his own.
- It is noticeable when I have left home to seek my identity elsewhere.
- When I find myself with anger, resentment, jealousy, lust or greed.
- When I wonder why someone hurt me, rejected me or didn't pay enough attention to me.
- When I am bothered by someone else's success, my own loneliness, and the way the world abuses me.
- When I am afraid of being disliked, blamed, put aside, passed over, ignored or persecuted.
- When I am constantly developing strategies to defend myself.
- Does a little criticism make you angry? Does a little rejection make you depressed? Does a little praise raise your spirits and a little success excite you?
- It takes way too little to lift us up or thrust us down because we have the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines us.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME** but I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.
- Here's the thing. There can be many leavings. Most of us leave regularly. We find ourselves walking away from home over and over again.
- Question: In what way(s) are you leaving home?

## C. When I leave home I will always be disappointed

*14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

- The promises of the distant country did not hold up.

- When his money ran out, when he had no more gifts to give, he was tossed aside as though he did not exist. He was left friendless and penniless.
- He had lost money, home, health, honor, self-respect, reputation . . . everything,
- The world's love is filled with ifs. If I succeed, I will be liked. If I drink I will feel better. If I work longer hours I will be admired. If I lose weight people will notice me. If I am funnier I will be included. If I *look* successful I will *be* successful. If I find a girl/guy, I will be satisfied.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME** because he knows that these always end up disappointing. And eventually, when the money runs out, when relationships fail, we find ourselves feeding the pigs and we realize we really should return home. But just like leaving is a choice, so is returning.

## II. I can choose to return home.

*17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' 20 So he got up and went to his father.*

### A. I return home when I come to the end of myself.

- He left home with money, pride, an eye to the future. Now he has nothing.
- This was probably gradual. He was losing money. Then losing friends. Kept hoping it would get better. Kept trying to fix it himself. It didn't help.
- He was truly lost and deeply lonely. It was this complete lostness that brought him to his senses.
- It can be a huge, life altering point like this son. Some of you have lived like this. You can point to the day, even the hour, when you decided it just didn't work.
- Or it is smaller. A struggle in particular area. With a specific behavior or attitude.
- As long as you think you can fix it, feel better, succeed, get happier, on your own, you will not return home. **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- Right here is a crucial decision point. What allowed him to opt for life instead of death? In that moment, what made him turn for home instead of death.

### B. I return home when I give up control.

- Do you know what triggered his return home? He began to remember – however faintly – his identity as the father's son. This is a process. The son had to travel home. It was a journey.
- Even though he has lost all the dignity and trappings of sonship, he is aware that in fact he is the son who had dignity to lose.
- I wonder how many times he rehearsed this speech on his way home. Imaginary results. What would happen? What would people say? What his father say? Do?
- There are two problems the young son must still grapple with.
- 1) He is trying to retain control.
- His speech that he has prepared has him maintaining some level of control.
- When I am a hired hand, I can still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away or complain about my pay.
- I have so often seen this attitude in me. Lord, I will come back to you. I can't do this on my own. But I am going to reserve the right to keep my distance, even just a little bit. I am returning as a hired hand, not a son. Why does this happen?

- 2) He doubts the character of his father. His speech reveals that he has doubts about how he will be received when he gets home. He doesn't think he will be truly welcomed. He is still thinking conditional love.
- How often do we come to God, carrying our failures, our sins, guilt about our past, worries about the future, and so we come to God feeling like we still owe God something, or that he demands an explanation.
- So we move back towards God . . . a little. "Well, I couldn't make it on my own. I have to acknowledge that God is the only resources left to me. I will go to God and ask for forgiveness in the hope that I will receive minimal punishment and be allowed to survive on the condition of harsh labor." God is harsh and judgmental, who makes me feel guilty.
- Unfortunately, this just breeds resentment and does not bring freedom even though **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**

### **C. I return home when I begin to embrace my real identity.**

*"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

- Belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come readily.
- My human experience tells me that forgiveness is always seems to have some measure of conditions or expectations attached to it.
- The Father was always looking. Always loving. Always welcoming. He did not change. It is how he loves and and this kind of love is . . . frustrating. It doesn't make sense. It is unconditional. When I think of his love this way I squirm.
- I don't deserve this . . . exactly. And you never will. The love he lavishes on us is over the top. It is amazing but makes us uncomfortable. We crave it but are afraid to sell out to it.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- Do I truly want to be so totally forgiven that am restored to the full responsibility of a son such that a new way of living becomes possible?
- Consider, Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied Jesus.
- Judas was so distraught he could no longer see himself as God's child. He could see no way back and in despair he hung himself.
- Peter, in the midst of his despair, clung to his identity and through many tears, came home and was restored.
- Identity statements or diagram.
- Jesus is the true prodigal.
- He left his true home. Went to a foreign country. Gave away all he had. Returned through the cross to his fathers home. Not as a rebellious son, but as a obedient son. He lived the long and painful journey that he describes.
- His journey is what makes is possible for us to return home.
- When he went through it all and returned to heaven, God said "Quick. Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; let us eat and celebrate! Because my children who, as you know, were dead have returned to life; they were lost and have been found again! My prodigal Son has brought them all back."

- Maybe you don't identify so much with the younger son. You are trying hard. You are serving God. You are not running in the wrong direction. Maybe you are doing your best but frustrated that it doesn't seem like it's working. For that you have to come back next week.