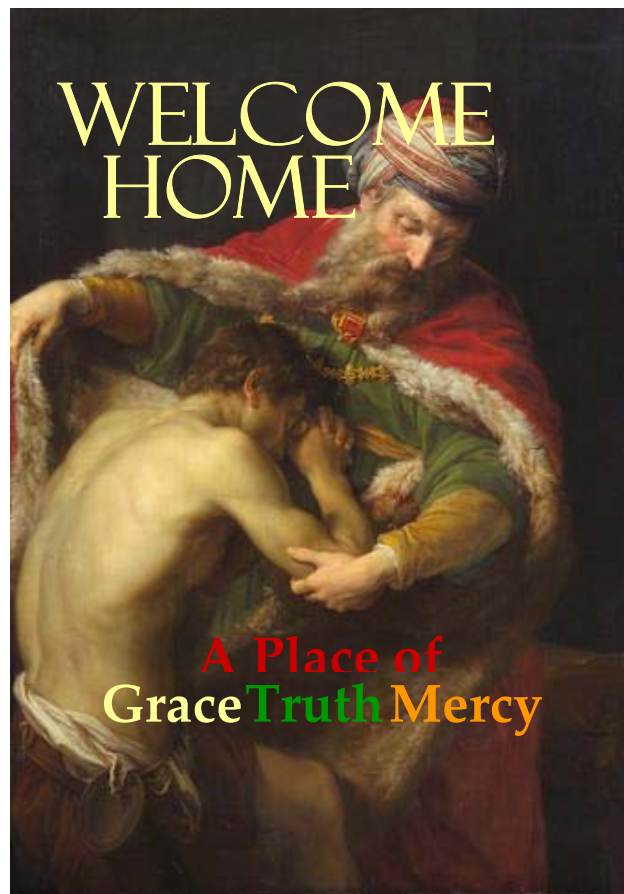


The Covenant Pulpit



"The Far Country at Home"

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In 1981, four men met in a small coffee shop on the Seattle waterfront for a meeting that would launch an empire. Ten years earlier, three guys had started this little coffee shop across from the Pike Street Market, charging outrageous prices for their specialty coffees. Except for a few coffee aficionados, hardly anyone had heard of this place that the locals called *Starbucks*. In that meeting, Howard Shultz presented an audacious vision: he would turn a single coffee shop into an international phenomenon.

People said that Shultz was crazy to think that people would pay up to \$5 for coffee drinks that could be made for less than 40 cents at home. But some 30 years later, 20 million Americans visit a *Starbucks* every day. On average, a typical customer goes to a *Starbucks* 18 times a month, shelling out \$780 a year. If an ounce of gasoline cost the same as an ounce of *Starbucks* coffee, we would pay \$40 a gallon at the pump! But Howard Shultz tapped into a postmodern angst that is bigger than coffee. Investment guru, Jon Markman, lets you in on the secret in an article entitled *Caffeine and Community*:

“Every morning it costs me about 40 cents for a caffeine jumpstart. I can squeeze three cups from four tablespoons of a \$12 bag of *Starbucks* coffee. But that doesn’t keep me from one of three *Starbucks* in my downtown Seattle office building. There I am warmly greeted by one of several regular employees who know my drink—double tall extra-hot latte with a single pump of sugar-free vanilla. They swipe my *Starbucks* Smart Card (Athens Olympic Edition). A few moments later I’m sipping a \$3.22 drink in the elevator en route to my office.

It makes no sense. Why would I want a fourth cup of coffee before nine o’clock in the morning? Why would I spend eight times more than my coffee costs at home? Why would I use a *Starbucks*’s Smart Card, letting them charge me interest on already-overpriced coffee? Why do I go back to the same *Starbucks* in the afternoon?

I am a sucker for what Howard Shultz termed ‘the third place of American life.’ Somewhere between the stress of home and the stress of the office, I find a neutral place where there are always ‘friends’ behind the counter. They even care enough to remember exactly how I like my coffee. They always greet me with a smile and some playful banter. They don’t judge or hassle me. And, with a simple swipe of the Smart Card, I’m not even aware that this moment of communal bliss cost me anything. No wonder I return often to these homey confines with overstuffed chairs, newspapers, and soothing New Age music. It’s like home, only without any of the stress.”

You can buy your coffee cheaper at *Dunkin' Donuts*, but *Starbucks* gives community with its caffeine. Sociologist and writer, Thomas Wolfe, has written, "Loneliness is the most pervasive feeling in America today." No matter how many friends we have on Facebook, or how many text messages we exchange, most of us are still lonely. Rocker Bruce Springsteen captures the angst of postmoderns in a hit song: "We're a long, long way from home. Home is a long, long way from us."

Maybe that's why the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is one of the most beloved stories of all time. There is no more poignant scene in literature than the lost son returning from the *far country*, a shadow of the proud rebel who sped off in the fast lane, now a raggedy scarecrow speckled with the mud of the hog wallow and smelling of pigs and prostitutes. As he shuffles along the long road home, he rehearses his apology. His last desperate hope is that his dad might let him live in the servants' quarters as a hired hand.

But it is what happens next that puts a lump in your throat. An old man stands at the gate, peering down the road that leads from the *far country*. Daily he comes to that gate, hoping that this will be the day that his boy comes home. And then he sees him, first a speck on the far horizon. Now a limping ragamuffin comes into focus. At first he gasps in horror at what the *far country* has done to his boy. Then, gathering his robes about him, he runs to his son. Socrates wrote, "Men of distinction never run in public." But this father cares more about his child than his own dignity. He would even be willing to leave his place in glory and hang mangled on a cross to bring his boy home. This is more than the "feel good" of a *Starbucks*' moment purchased on the cheap with the swipe of a Smart Card.

He smothers his stunned son in an embrace and plasters his dirty face with kisses of joy. His son didn't expect this. He tries to stammer out his rehearsed apology. But his father won't let his son suffer another moment of humiliation. He drowns out his son's words in a burst of excitement, yelling to his servants with rapid fire commandments that make you want to stand up and applaud: "Someone find the best robe in the house for this boy! (We need to cover his shame)." "Somebody else put some sandals on his blistered feet (He's my son, not a servant)." "Get a ring and put it on his finger!" (I want no doubt that he is fully restored)." "Kill that fat calf we've been saving for a special occasion! (Tonight we're going to party)." Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, "You can never go home again. But this boy is welcomed as if he had never left, or broken his father's heart, or torn apart the family. Some of the grandest words in Scripture are recorded in Luke

15:24, "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." St. Augustine wrote, "The whole gospel is in this tiny verse."

Every one of us, who has ever wanted to come home again, to be loved unconditionally, to be forgiven fully, to be accepted and valued in spite of our shortcomings, are deeply moved by this story. None of us has ever found such a place this side of heaven, but we long for the *Father's house*.

Did you see that other son? We don't like to focus on him because he's such a downer in this joyful story. Besides, he's not very likable. He's the party pooper; one of those prigs who not only follows the rules, but makes sure that everyone else does too; the kid who reminds the teacher that she forgot to collect the homework; the family tattletale; the one who gives you the evil eye when you mess up. He's kept a scorecard of every one of his brother's sins in the *far country*. It's a good thing that he wasn't at the gate when his wayward brother came home.

I'll be honest: it's not my nature to like the older brother. But, the older I get, the more I feel for him. He's so lonely out there all alone. Can you feel the excruciating pain that comes gushing out of his tortured soul in verse 29: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends..." All his life he has knocked himself out to earn his father's love. Yet, in his obsessive perfectionism, he never felt like he measured up. How tragic. He doesn't even know his own father. If he could just figure out why his father could forgive his younger brother, he would understand why he didn't have to earn his father's love. He is as lost as his younger brother. But his father loves him just as much. The same dad, who waited at the gate for one son to return, now goes outside to plead with the other to come in. Listen to his words in verse thirty-one: "All that I have is yours." If our church, our house, and all of us individually are to be a reflection of the *Father's House*, this will have to be true of us:

The Father's house is a place of *true* grace.

What is grace? Quite simply, it is love that is undeserved. It is to love one another the way the father loves both of his sons. St. Paul described this love in Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her..." The truth is: we should all love one another this way. I see four things in this love: 1) **It takes the initiative.** When we were lost, Christ came looking for us. In Luke 15 Christ tells three little parables. A shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to find a lost lamb. A

woman tears her house apart to find a single lost coin. A father goes looking for two lost sons. 2) **It is unconditional.** Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God didn't tell us to clean ourselves up before he would love us. He loved us before we even tried to clean ourselves up. The father loved both of his boys with all their hang-ups. 3) **It is sacrificial.** Christ "gave himself up for the church." The father gives everything he possesses to his boys, even though neither deserves it. 4) **It is purposeful.** St. Paul says in Ephesians 5:27 that Christ gives himself up for the church "...to present her to himself as a radiant bride, without spot, wrinkle, or blemish." The father will not give up on either of his boys until they are transformed by his heart. This is not cheap grace that says, "No matter what you do, it's okay with me." This is *true* grace that says, "I won't rest until you come home. I'll love you no matter what. I'll stick with you no matter how much it costs. And I'll invest in you no matter how much it costs."

Until the watching world sees us loving our spouses, our children, one another, and even them like this, they haven't seen the *Father's House*. Why are people staying out in the *far country*, even though it is systematically dismantling their lives? Why don't they come home to the *Houses of God*? Almost 100 million Americans never attend church. Most of them have attended church at some time or another, but they won't come back. Could it be that when they got to the gate, they found that the house was run by the older brothers and sisters, and not the Father? Jesus wants us to look carefully at this parable and see ourselves in it. Notice three things:

1. This is a house with three prodigals.

The setting of the parable is clear back in verses 1&2: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus claims that he has come from God. They know he is a rabbi. Others say he is a prophet. They have even heard rumors that he claims to be the Son of God, even God in the flesh. If that's true, then he is a blasphemer. So they dog his every step, trying to catch him in some heresy or trap him in some inconsistency. And now they think they've got the goods on him. He welcomes and eats with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners who have never darkened the doorway of a synagogue. Do you see their logic? They know that their heavenly Father is a holy God. To them, holiness means that God will not have fellowship with someone until they have cleaned up their lives and are living by the rules and regulations of religion. But Jesus eats and fellowships with sinners. Therefore he can't be

from God. Jesus looks at them and says, in effect, “You don’t even begin to know my Father. Let me tell you about him.” And he proceeds in rapid-fire succession to tell three parables to paint a portrait of his Father: a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep, a woman who searches for a lost coin, and a father who searches for two lost sons, and even embraces them. People call this last story the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The word *prodigal* is not in the text. But it is wonderfully descriptive of the story. It is an old English word that describes a “reckless spendthrift.” It means to spend everything until you have nothing left. It is almost always used to describe the younger son. I think it describes all three of the main characters in the story. It also describes the Pharisees and “sinners” standing before him. It describes Jesus himself. Jesus wants us to ask how it describes each of us.

1) A child who squanders *holiness*

Jesus levels his gaze at the sinners standing before him: prostitutes, tax collectors who have sold out to the Roman army of occupation, drunkards, gluttons, and people who have sampled every kind of moral perversion. They are living in the *far country*. There was a time when they grew up in the synagogue, and learned their Bible verses. But there came a moment (maybe when they were teenagers or went off to college) that sermons became boring, and traditions too confining, and rules too stifling. They begin to itch for freedom and autonomy; to throw off the shackles of narrow truth, demanding Scriptures, and old-fashioned morality. The *far country* called them to adventure, and the holiness in the Father’s house was more than they could bear. So they broke their parents’ hearts and headed down the road to rebellion. Jesus is not only describing those “sinners” standing before him, but also millions of lost people in our world. Maybe, as he spins the story of the younger son, he is painting your portrait. This is the prodigal who squanders away the holiness and truth of the Father. He wastes his spiritual inheritance on that which destroys his life.

2) A child who squanders *grace*

Now he turns to the *Pharisees and teachers of the law*. They are the older brother. They’ve never left the *House of the Father*. They are there like clock work each Sabbath, and every other time the church door is open. They hold to traditional morality, keep all the rules and rituals, study their Scriptures, and get righteously indignant at all the younger brothers who are squandering their inheritance in the *far country*. Most of all, they work hard to earn the Father’s love with their piety. But their perfectionism makes them miserable party poopers. A lot of them are bitter, and some have even

left the *Father's House* because their religious service didn't pay off (or they sit and pout in the church because they didn't get their way). They are just as lost as the sinners. They don't have a clue about their heavenly Father's heart of love. They too are prodigal sons, for they squander the grace that God showers on them. Worse than that, they keep it locked up and refuse to give it out to those who mess up. Christ is describing a lot of church folks.

3) A Father who squanders love

Remember, this story is Jesus' answer to religious leaders who question why he, a man representing God, would welcome and fellowship with sinners. He wants them to know that his Father is also a prodigal. He gives until there is nothing left to give. He squanders his love on sinners who take it and head for the *far country*. He squanders it on religious sons and daughters who take it and then deny it as they pout in bitterness outside the house. He extravagantly gives it away to church folks who bottle it up and refuse to give it away to those who need it most. Isn't it interesting that it was the "sinners" who flocked to Jesus. I think they did because they saw in him the Father's extravagant, wasteful, unrestrained, reckless love. If the *Houses of God* were filled with that kind of love, those who have been abused by the *far country* would flock to the churches in masse.

2. It is possible to be in the *far country* while still at home.

A subtle deception lurks in *Houses of God*. We can think that, because we are in the house, that we are in fellowship with the Father. No deception is more destructive to our souls. Note well these facts in Christ's parable.

1) The younger son is gone before he leaves.

Verse 13 says, "Not long after that, the younger son got together all that he had, he set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living." He grabs the inheritance and takes off running. For a long time he had chafed in this house of holiness. His body was in the house, but his heart was already in the *far country*. The church is full of folks who make the scene for an hour on Sunday, fidgeting during worship, stifling a yawn during the sermon, and rushing out after the benediction. They're just putting in time. But their heart belongs to the *far country*.

2) The older child is gone though he never leaves.

In verse 29 the older son says to his father, "I never disobeyed your orders." The father replies in verse 31, "My son, you are always with me."

There are lots of folks who fastidiously avoid the *far country*. They are in the *Father's House* more than their own house. Every time the door is open, they are there. They work hard in the Father's fields, just like the older brother. But they are in their own kind of *far country*. Do you see the deception of church? Though the older brother never leaves the house, he is farther from the father than is his brother fighting pigs for corn husks in the *far country*. At least the sinner sees the mess he's in, and comes home. The religious type hardly ever comes to grips with the mess he's in.

3) Home is where the heart is.

This story is not so much about a house as it is about hearts. St. Augustine says that the *far country* is not a geographical location, but a place in the heart. He wrote, "Once you step out of the Father's heart, you are already in the far country. To be in the far country is to be far from the Father's heart." Both brothers ran from the house because they couldn't abide their father's heart. The younger brother left because he hated the fact that his father was a man of truth, and morals, and holiness. The older brother ran outside because he hated the fact that his father was a man of grace, and forgiveness, and mercy. But at least they left the house. A lot of church folks stay and try to rearrange the *House of God*. On the one extreme, they turn it into a place of cheap grace, compromising the truth, relaxing morals, and forsaking holiness for entertainment in hopes of luring the *younger brothers* back from the *far country* by turning the church into a facsimile of the far country. On the other hand, *Houses of God* become places devoid of grace, full of dead orthodoxy, tired rituals and traditions, where rules and regulations replace grace, and people perform for one another out of fear that the *older brothers and sisters* might go outside and pout. But neither of these churches fools anyone. If a healthy balance of the Father's heart of grace and truth are not there, people figure it out and stay away in droves.

3. This house belongs to the Father, not to the children.

We used to sing the words of an old hymn: "This is my Father's house..." Sometimes we forget that this is not *our* house. But it will never be *His* house until we seek his heart, are transformed by it, and live it out. Only then will lost and lonely sons and daughters come home from the *far country* and join the celebration of grace that permeates the *Father's House*. To see this kind of community will require more than a swipe of a Smart Card.