

“Turning Towards Home”
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
for A Sermon for Every Sunday
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What makes today’s story one of the great stories? . . . not just of scripture, but of all literature? What makes the story of the Prodigal Son so resonant for so many of us? I think it’s the way this story taps into the human yearning for home – home as more than a place . . . more than a house or a town. Our yearning for home is the yearning to belong, to be known and loved, to be *whole*. That’s a yearning we sometimes have a hard time satisfying, even if our family’s intact, and our household’s pretty stable.

To feel as if you belong is one of the great triumphs of human existence, says the poet and philosopher David Whyte.

[*To feel as if you belong*] and especially to sustain a life of belonging and to invite others into that – has always been acknowledged as one of the great achievements of human existence. But [Whyte goes on] it’s interesting to think that our vulnerability – our sense of [woundedness] around *not* belonging – is actually one of our core competencies; that though the crow is just itself and the stone is just itself and the mountain is just itself, and the cloud, and the sky is just itself — we are the one part of creation that knows what it’s like to live in exile, and that the ability to turn your face towards home is one of the great human endeavors and the great human stories.¹

We humans know what it’s like to live in exile. And *the ability*, while in exile, *to turn your face towards home* . . . it’s one of the great human endeavors – an endeavor we read about in this parable from Luke.

Today’s parable from Luke is one of the best and best-known parables, I also think, because whenever you read it, you can notice something new. This time, when I read it, I noticed how both sons in the story feel a kind of exile from home – a kind of woundedness around *not* belonging. One son is in a land far away, literally remote. The other son is right outside his house – just in the fields! – but he’s laboring in vain, after something he hasn’t yet been able to name. And as much as the father wants them both to feel at home, he can’t force it. He can only offer it. The sons have to decide whether they’ll turn their faces that way – whether they’ll make that journey toward home.

I’ve been reading Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s book of forgiving. That’s what it’s called: “*The Book of Forgiving*.” It stirred me to notice *the place of forgiveness* in Jesus’ story and in the choice both sons are offered. We usually focus on the *father’s* forgiveness. The father’s willingness to forgive his youngest son’s bad behavior is what enables the prodigal son to come home. And the father’s readiness to forgive his eldest son’s petulance is really the last word of the story. But reading it this week, I noticed how the need for forgiveness runs throughout this story and involves all of its characters.

¹ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/29/david-whyte-belonging/>

The thing about forgiveness is, we all need it sometimes. That's how Desmond and his daughter Mpho Tutu begin the book they wrote together. "There have been times when each and every one of us has needed to forgive [they say]. There have also been times when each and every one of us has needed to be forgiven. And there will be many times again. In our own ways we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt [ourselves and] others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again."² I'd say, it's also how we get home. It's how we turn our faces toward that elusive sense of belonging inside of ourselves and inside our families and communities.

Brené Brown pointed me to the Tutus' book with just a few things she's said about forgiveness, the most remarkable of which was that "in order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die." Brené heard that in church! Her pastor was telling about his experience of counseling a couple who were on the brink of a divorce after the woman discovered that her husband was having an affair. They were both devastated by the potential end of their marriage, but she couldn't forgive him for betraying her, and he couldn't seem to forgive himself, either. The pastor observed, "In order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die. If you make a choice to forgive, you have to face into the pain. You simply have to hurt."³

For forgiveness to happen, something has to die – it has to be let go of, and grieved. The Tutus unpack that in their book. They recommend a fourfold path to healing that begins with telling the story of your wound and naming the hurt you felt – really facing the pain of whatever you did, or whatever was done to you. Forgiving *yourself* is one of the last things they talk about, but I think it's one of the first things the prodigal son has to do. I think it must be part of what happens when he "comes to his senses." He realizes what he's done: how he's insulted his father in the most grievous way possible . . . how he's forsaken his family, his homeland, his religious principles . . . how he's failed to make it on his own! (His dream of life in some faraway and exotic land had completely unraveled. Letting go of that dream must've been hard.) On some level, that young man had to let himself feel what must have been a terrible disappointment and a monumental regret. He understood it and grieved it. But then . . . he let himself believe he could make a new start. Not as the beloved son, maybe, but as a resident of his Father's house – as someone who belonged there, in some capacity anyway.

Desmond Tutu says that, in his native language, one asks for forgiveness by saying, "*I ask for peace.*"⁴ The prodigal son was determined to ask for peace from the person he had wronged, the person he knew could grant him both peace and a place to belong. That's part of what makes his story one of the great human stories.

One of the stories in the Tutus' book reminded me of this. It was a story about a woman named Lisa Cotter, who had killed two girls in a car accident and was sent to prison as a

² Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, HarperOne, 2015, p 3.

³ Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* Spiegel & Grau, 2015, p149-150.

⁴ Tutu & Tutu, 24.

result.

If I could stop time, [she said] I would go back to that night and not drink and drive. But I can't. I have to live with the guilt and the shame. Every day, in so many ways, I have to own what I've done In prison, the only way to live with my guilt was to have structure. I ran miles and miles every day around the track in the prison yard. Every mile I cried. [I cried for the two girls I'd killed. I cried for their parents' suffering. I cried for my own children whose mother had become a killer in the eyes of our community.]

I also read spiritual books and twelve-step workbooks, and in one workbook on healing and forgiving yourself, it said to look at yourself in the mirror and say, "I love you." Every morning [I would stand in front of the small sink in the cell] that I shared with five other women and say, "I love you, Lisa." A cell-mate of mine had been watching me do this every day, week after week, year after year, and one day she started clapping and said, "You finally mean it." I didn't even realize that for five years I hadn't been able to look myself in the eye as I said the words – until that morning. "Now the real work begins," she said. I had no idea how true that was.⁵

Speaking of "real work," the older son was furious when he came in from the fields and heard that his brother had come home and had been so lovingly received by their father. He lashed out about his *slacker* brother, *so* irresponsible; he had *stolen* not only from their father, but from *everyone who'd stayed home*, who'd tended the family farm all this time. The son lashed out at his dad, too, who was treating them unfairly, he said, *who had always been unfair*, had never acknowledged his eldest son's hard work, had never appreciated how he had *slaved* in those fields, year after year.

I'm just guessing here, but I think this eldest son's anger must have stemmed from a whole lot of pain, and the feeling that there was something profoundly wrong with the way his own life was unfolding. What was the shape his exile? Had he felt his own kind of wanderlust, but suppressed it? . . . did he now resent what felt like a "requirement" to stay home? Did he imagine himself better than his brother – better than *anyone* in that house; had he held himself to some impossible standard for behavior? What did this eldest son need to let go and grieve in order to forgive his brother, his dad, himself? The idea that people are defined by what they do? The conviction that his father was keeping score? His certainty that all of his back-breaking work would earn him a place – even the *best* place – in his father's house? I suspect that such ideas had shaped this older son's choices for a long, long time. He had a lot to let go.

We are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile – to live with woundedness around the sense that we don't belong. But we are also able (because God makes us able) to acknowledge that woundedness, to feel it, to understand it, and to let it go.

Think now about your own vulnerabilities . . . your own woundedness . . . what keeps

⁵ Tutu & Tutu, 203.

you from feeling at home in yourself, or anywhere. Do you feel like you're working yourself ragged, and resent all you have to do? Did you have dreams you poured yourself into – dreams went nowhere, that make you feel like a failure? Have you hurt people who love you? Have the people you love hurt you? Have you acted in ways that make it hard for you to look yourself in the mirror? Have others said things to you that make you doubt the beauty and belovedness of the person you see in the mirror? What do you need to feel and to grieve and *to let go* in order to turn your face toward home?

In the end, we are not defined by what we've done – for good or for ill. We are not defined by anything that's happened to us, either. We're defined by God's love for us. We're defined by God's decision to make peace with us and extend wholeness to us, through Christ, through the cross. For forgiveness to happen, something has to die – or in this case, *someone*. There is still hard work to do, but the hardest work has already been done. God has done it for us! So we can turn our faces toward God and the peace and the wholeness God offers, if we want. We can, by God's grace, turn our faces toward home.

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