

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Luke 15:11-32

**SERMON SERIES:** Home, Sweet Home

**SERMON TITLE:** A Place of Brokenness and Grace

The verse from Henry Van Dyke printed on the front of your bulletin provides the theme for a series of sermons this month entitled *Home, Sweet Home*. The verse goes like this:

*But every home where Love abides,  
and Friendship is a guest,  
Is surely home, and home, sweet home:  
For there the heart can rest.<sup>1</sup>*

This morning's scripture lesson is a familiar parable told by Jesus about family and love and home. The story is found in Luke 15:11-32. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

Now this may seem a little weird, but I think I know the family in this parable. Now I know, this story is a couple of thousand years old and as far as we know, the characters are made up, but these people are so familiar.

I especially recognize the brokenness of this family. All of us have a little brokenness in our families, don't we? Just speaking for myself, I know those two boys—or at least siblings who are like them. And I know the father—or at least parents who are like him—although I've got to tell you, the kind of love displayed by the father in this story is extraordinary. In fact, there's another word for this kind of love, its grace. It's the kind of love that's given unconditionally, even when it's undeserved and unearned. It's the kind of love that makes a home, home, sweet home. And it's the kind of love that God shows us—even the worst among us—which is one of the points of the parable.

But this kind of love can be hard to come by even for some parents. Let me tell you

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<sup>1</sup> Van Dyke, Henry. "A Home Song." *As I Like It*. 30 Aug. 2008. 30 Aug. 2008 <<http://sj-ad-infinity.blogspot.com/2008/08/home-song.html>>.

about the family that comes to my mind every time I hear this story. It's the story of a mother named Barbara and her two sons. Barbara was in her eighties when I knew her. She and her son John—were members of a church that I served.

And I guess I had known Barbara and John for about a year when Barbara was diagnosed with cancer and only given a few months to live. It was under these circumstances that I learned of Barbara's second son. She had nothing to do with him. To this day, I don't even know his name, because to her, he was dead. Now as far as she knew, he was still alive—but to her he was dead. I don't even know for sure what happened to destroy this relationship between a mother and her son, but whatever it was, it had happened years before. And she hadn't seen him in all of those years. And I believe that if he had shown up around Barbara's place, he wouldn't have been met with hugs and kisses and a big party—he would have been met with a locked door! And Barbara made it very clear to me that when she died, she didn't want any effort made to find this son to notify him of her death because she didn't want him anywhere near her funeral service.

Now Barbara had a great relationship with her other son, John. He had cared for his mother and stood by her. He worked the ranch for her for years, and he was going to get all of her inheritance. But John was as bitter toward his brother as his mother was.

Now did this family create a home, sweet home? Well, they may have claimed that for themselves, but only by overlooking the brokenness within this family that was exacerbated by the intensity of their bitterness and anger. Grace for the other brother was no where to be found. And even God was pretty difficult to see.

Which is to say that the kind of grace displayed by the father in Jesus' parable—the kind of love that makes for home, sweet home—is sometimes hard to come by even for parents. But

when someone shows grace within the brokenness of family life—whether it’s a parent or someone else—troubled hearts can find rest—home, sweet home.

Let me tell you another story of family brokenness, but this time, with a little grace added to the mix. And by the way, see if you can identify the one who practices grace in this story. Michael J. Daly titles this story: ***The Prodigal Father***. *Thirteen years is a long time to go without seeing someone, especially if it’s your father. Save for a quick visit before I went off to graduate school, bumping into each other for a few minutes at a family wedding, and a short lunch so he could meet his newborn granddaughter, we had not spent any extended time together for more than a decade. Yet here I was on a Friday afternoon, picking up my father at the airport to spend the weekend with us.*

There was a reason for this distance between father and son. [It] *took place right before Christmas break my freshman year of college. My mom had come to take me back home for the holidays. I knew things were strained between my parents, but I was unprepared to hear what she would say. After a few minutes catching up with one another, she said simply, “Your father’s having an affair. He’s moved in with another woman.” I was stunned. A man I had looked up to had left me speechless....From that day forward...he had left not only my mother’s life, but mine as well.*

After Michael picked up his father at the airport and took him home for the weekend, he began to be bothered by what he was seeing. Michael writes: *As he was spending his first real, quality time with his granddaughter, I witnessed from a distance their interactions. Our daughter smiled and laughed as he read aloud from her books, pushed her in her car down the street,...and played with several of the toys he had bought her. As I watched, the thought crossed my mind to say to her, “If you only knew the full story.”*

*Returning to work the following Monday, I described to a friend what had happened that weekend. I told him how I watched with mixed blessings as our daughter played and interacted with my dad with a love that I know from firsthand experience is unconditional. She displayed a trust and vulnerability with him that for me that for me had long been lost. After I told him what I thought was my rather insightful remark of how things would have changed between my dad and his granddaughter if I had told her the whole story, he said something far more penetrating and valuable. "Well, Mike, maybe she does know the whole story." My daughter, though unable to put it into words herself, had been saying the same thing all along....*

*For thirteen long years I have dutifully chosen to honor [my father's] inexcusable act and hold him accountable. I've reminded myself time and time again—with that story of betrayal remaining predominant in my memory—that he fled responsibility and relationships, leaving in his wake a home and hearts that were broken... Yet, in the midst of my rejection, over the years I saw hints of his desire to repair our relationship as best he could.... I didn't see it as my task to help rebuild it.*

*Thankfully, since the birth of my daughter nearly two years ago, I'm starting to tell a different story.<sup>2</sup>*

So who is it that first practices grace in this story? Michael's little girl. God works like that you know. The star of the story doesn't have to be a mother or father, or even an adult—it can be little girl. Because you see, when there's brokenness within families, the important thing is that someone—anyone—begins to practice grace. It's this kind of love that produces home, sweet home.

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<sup>2</sup> Daly, Michael J. "The Prodigal Father." *Notre Dame Magazine Online*. Spring 2002. Notre Dame University. 13 Sept. 2008 <<http://www.nd.edu/~ndmag/sp2002/daley.html>>.

