

March 14, 2010  
Scarboro United Church  
Calgary AB  
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Read Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

If you have watched any TV lately you have probably seen the commercial with the two young girls sitting at a table with a man. One girl is asked if she wants a pony and when she says, "Yes," is given a toy one. The other girl is asked if she wants a pony. When she says "Yes," the man clicks his tongue and out comes a real pony. The first girl can't believe it, "You never said there was a real pony!" she says. The man answers, "you never asked."

You know the one I mean? How do you think the first girl feels? I'd like you to take that scene and put it on a shelf for a few minutes; I'll get back to it.

What does it mean to you to come home? Think about that. Do you know where home is? A place? I have to admit that I find home to be a nebulous concept. What exactly is it? Perhaps my uncertainty is related to the fact that I moved from my first home when I was six months old. I have no memory of it. Dad was a student minister in my early days so we moved frequently. For four years it was Edmonton in the winter, Paradise Valley in the Summer. I have a few memories of those places.

Then we lived in Edmonton for a couple of years when I started school, then White Plains, New York, for a year, while my Dad did graduate studies at Union Seminary, then Edmonton for four years, Calgary for 10 whole years including Junior and Senior High, University and a couple of years working. Claremont, California, where I studied theology, for two years, Calgary for seven, Spirit River for three as a newly Ordained Minister, Edmonton for eight, Wetaskiwin for seven, Edmonton, again, for nine, Red Deer for three, then Calgary. Not going to move any more. Coming to Calgary was a homecoming of sorts, many of my formative years, my salad days, were spent here.

All that is a long way to say that when I think of going *back* home it is not to a place, a building, a house. Coming home is to people, my wife, my parents, my daughter's. It may be trite but for me it is true that home really is where the heart is, when we gather together with family and friends, like right here, right now.

Coming home can be so . . . hard?! The worship planning group, reflecting on the story of the Prodigal, raised the difficulty of coming home. They put the question to you as both a question and a statement, and with a pause. Coming home can be so . . . hard?!

In the story of the Prodigal we have to ask, "Who in the story is extravagantly wasteful?" That is the meaning of prodigal. Extravagantly wasteful.

Two people have trouble coming home in the story. The younger son who demands his inheritance, blows it and is ashamed to come home. Is this you? He first has to let go of his youthful, prideful arrogance, he turns back home in defeat, humbled, ready to throw himself on his father's mercy. He is received with prodigious, wasteful extravagance.

Or are you the father? The extravagant, wasteful father who gave half of his estate to a demanding, insolent young adult, yet is ready to welcome him home, restore his place in the family, write him back into the will, throwing a party beyond belief. Robert Frost, in *The Death of the Hired Man*, says "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in." Not everyone has such a home.

We are a wonderful church, ready to welcome refugees, ready to welcome strangers, if

you need us then we want to be here for you. We see ourselves running down the road, arms wide open, welcoming, welcoming home. We can do this, this is who we are and what we do! You want a church home, we want you to be at home. We know this in our heads.

But aren't we the older brother? Sometimes? Too often? The one pouting out behind the church. The good one, the one who always did what was asked. The one who stayed here at home while all those others dropped out. We've not just kept the home fires burning, we've got everything just the way we want it. And now these new people come in and want to change things! Is everything we did wrong? *We've* done so much, what have *they* done? We have excellent programs, why don't they want to help keep them going? They don't want to do the hard things we had to do all these years? It's not fair!

In this month's Observer magazine there is an opinion column by article by Connie DenBok in which she writes about the influx of people from the poorest countries, the two-thirds world into Canada and the communities and churches where we live. She says:

. . . I will refute anyone who accuses us of intentional racism. If good will and genuine intention could bridge the gap, we would have done it years ago. United Church people will feed, clothe, fund and sponsor strangers on the smallest of provocations.

Our problem is that we've welcomed newcomers into our churches on condition that they not change our ways. As cultural liberals, we know we have to make space for diversity. But what if fully welcoming the stranger also means making space for values that are not compatible with our own theology and practice?

(The United Church Observer, March 2010, p. 34)

The problem with the TV commercial I spoke about earlier – remember that? – is that we don't know the whole story. It ends with the girl who only has the toy pony saying, “You never told me there was a real pony.” and the man responding simply, “You never asked.”

I would like to re-write that ending so the man instead says, “But my daughter, you live on our ranch. What I have is what you have. We have a small herd of horses, every one of them yours. This little girl was abused and rejected as a child and has come into our home. I want to give her this pony so she will feel welcome and at home. You have always been at home. Everything I have is yours, yours to share.

The older brother is still not at home, even though he has lived there all his life. He has squandered years of opportunity to get to know his father and yet he doesn't understand his father's immense generosity. He has had years of living in his father's house and property but does not appreciate it's true value. He thinks home is just property and cattle and sheep. He does not know its about generous, caring compassion and deep relationships. His life has been an extravagant waste – even more so than his brother's. And he is too proud, too arrogant to admit it.

I'm not just talking houses and homes. I am not just talking about the church and the abundance that surrounds us as we gripe about all this new music, and the “someone” who sat in “our” pew. Or how long the service went. Or “Why don't *they* do something about . . .” Or “Have you heard what *they're* doing now? Or the richness that diversity will bring with deep welcoming, radical welcoming, even of those who will change us.

We do need to turn around and come home, but we are so proud, so justifiably proud, of who we are and what we have done! Can we risk it? Can we risk letting it go so we can all go home and be at home . . . together? Can we risk dying to pride that we might live?

I am talking about still one thing. Creation is our home. Creation is a priceless gift that

surrounds us with its arms and holds us to its heart. And we don't think we have enough?

Globally we demand more and more and more like an impetuous, pride-filled, younger brother we want our inheritance and we want it now. Sadly we will never turn the whole world around, it's not possible and it never is possible to convince everyone. But we can change ourselves. We can back away from the pig trough. We can, as Fritz Perls used to say, lose our minds and come to our senses. We can turn around and head back home, back to where we truly belong.

Kathleen Norris writes, "Peace - that was the other name for home."