

The Journey Home

Reading this parable took me back to something that happened when I was about fourteen years old. I had gone to the local K-Mart to hang out with my friends, and while I was there I saw something that I really wanted. It was a ping-pong paddle. It had a smooth handle and nice thick padding. It looked just like the expensive paddle my older brother had. But unlike his, this one only cost \$5.95!

When I got home, I made the mistake of asking my mom if I could buy that paddle. She said no.

No maybe she had a good reason for saying know. I don't remember. But later that day, or maybe it was the next, I decided that I was going to buy it anyway. I snuck out of the house, climbed on my bike, and rode the three miles back to that K-Mart. I quickly and excitedly found the paddle, to it to the checkout line, paid for it, then climbed on my bike for the journey home

I was anxious to get home as quickly as possible, so I could sneak back in before my mom would even know I had been gone. The problem was, I couldn't ride very fast. You see, several months earlier I had had surgery on my right knee and was still unable to bend it. So the only way I could ride my bicycle was to pedal with my left leg, hold my right leg straight out in front, and use it to knock the pedal back down every time it came up.

Well, with my mind on my new paddle, I was about two-thirds of the way home, when all of a sudden my right foot got caught in the spokes of the front wheel. The front wheel stopped, the rest of the bike kept going, and the next thing I knew I was flying head first over the handlebars. The first part of me to hit the asphalt was my face. I lay there for a moment, stunned and in pain, my legs tangled up in the bicycle behind me. My mouth was already starting to swell, and when I finally lifted my head, I could see blood dripping. Somehow, slowly, I disentangled myself from the bike and stood up. With my face throbbing, I picked up the K-Mart bag with my ping pong paddle inside, and although the wheels on my bike were badly out of alignment, I climbed on, and began the slow, painful journey home.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a story of a journey, or rather two journeys: a journey away, and a journey home. One journey was easy; the other was very hard. One led to brokenness and despair; the other led to healing and restoration. Perhaps we've experienced journeys a bit like these.

Why did the younger son want to leave in the first place? Jesus doesn't include this in the parable, but we can't help but wonder. Was he unhappy for some reason? Was he simply restless, bored with his life? Perhaps he just wanted to see the world. Perhaps he wanted to see if he could make it on his own. Maybe he was searching to discover who he was, and thought he might find his answer elsewhere. Was that so bad? Don't we all at some point need to leave our childhood homes behind, to find and forge our own way in the world?

The way Jesus tells the story does imply that the boy was flippant, disrespectful, and self-centered—that he wanted what was due him, and he wanted it now! “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me!” According to tradition, the younger son would have been entitled to one third of his father's estate . . . after his father had died. And so to ask for it before he had died was rude in more ways than one. But the father, astonishingly, gives it to him

with nary a word. We are told that two days later the younger son “gathered everything he had,” which means he had converted his one third of the estate into money, including selling the family land (which according to tradition you just don’t do), and travelled to a “distant country,” presumably to get as far away from home as possible. Once there, Jesus tells us that he “squandered his property in dissolute living,” which according to my dictionary means lacking restraint; especially marked by indulgence in vices (such as drink or promiscuous sex). Suffice it to say he enjoyed himself. Well, as bad luck or karma would have it, just about the time his money ran out a famine struck. Suddenly, this wayward younger son finds himself without money, without food, and without friends. Jesus doesn’t spare any details in telling us just how deep the younger son had sunk. For a Jew to have a job feeding pigs was utterly unthinkable and shameful, since pigs were considered “unclean.” And no one, not even his employer, gave him so much as a scrap of food. He was starving, desperate, and totally alone.

Are we to identify with the younger son? We’ve all had our times of sowing wild oats, of going against the wishes of our parents, but surely few if any of us have ever sunk that low. We’re Mennonite, for God’s sake!

And yet I wonder about the distant country the younger son went to, and I wonder what distant countries we’ve been to. Those times or places where we lost ourselves, or forgot who we are. Perhaps a job that consumes us, a temptation that traps us, or a lifestyle that enslaves us, leaving us perpetually unsatisfied and wanting more.

Precisely when the younger son is at his lowest point, when he can go no lower, Jesus tells us that he “comes to himself.” This is the turning point in the story, the point where the journey home begins. It begins by his thinking of home, his remembering how good things had actually been at home, and what he had left behind, and no doubt this memory threatened to take him to even greater despair. But then, a realization: “I can go back home!” And a decision: “I will go back home!”

That decision was surely both difficult and easy. We can picture him struggling in indecision, the voices in his head saying, “how can you go home after all that has happened? You are simply getting what you deserve.” Yet finally, perhaps because of his foolishness and self-centeredness, some previously hidden resiliency, or some external voice he hadn’t yet identified, he does indeed decide to go home, with the caveat that he confess everything, lay himself completely bare, and put himself at his father’s mercy.

We don’t know how far that journey from the distant country was, nor how long it took. It probably seemed to the son like a lifetime. It surely was a miracle that he made it, given his condition. Then again, perhaps some unseen presence was bearing him on his journey.

And the greatest miracle was yet to come. Far beyond his most hopeful dreams, while he was yet a long way off, his father comes running to meet him, not with his fists raised but his arms open! The son stuck to the only plan he had: falling at his father’s feet and putting himself at his mercy. Yet his father’s response, virtually interrupting his confession, was to lift his younger son to his feet, and to command his servants to quickly bring out the finest robe, shoes for his feet, a ring for his finger, and to kill the fatted calf for a celebration. Do you realize what this means? The robe meant he was an honored guest. The shoes mean that he was to be not a slave but a son. The ring meant that his position in the family was restored! Surely Jesus was exaggerating a bit here, taking things way too far. The scribes and Pharisees would have thought so. They would have been incensed. A grown man simply doesn’t run; that goes against all propriety. And a respected elder would never welcome home such a disrespectful, sinful son.

Nevertheless, Jesus' point, as I read it, seems clear. God just wants us to come home. There is no conditional acceptance, no ongoing guilt placed upon us, no penalty to pay. God just wants us to come home. And when we do, God celebrates, extravagantly.

This is what the elder son, not to mention the scribes and Pharisees, could not understand. You see, the elder son had also taken a journey away from home, and he was still living in a distant country. His was a country with cold, hard rules, where good people are rewarded and bad people are punished, as if we all don't have both good and bad inside us. His was a country where legalism had replaced compassion, and judgment had replaced restoration. Until he recognized this, until he and they "came to themselves," they would never understand his father and what it meant to be at home, despite the fact that it was right in front of him, despite his father's pleading to come inside, his assurance that his own inheritance was secure.

There is a warning in this parable for us, along with the scribes and Pharisees. As soon as we think that we are better or more righteous than others, as soon as we begrudge the place of others in God's family, as soon as we believe that God gives us only what we deserve, we have become lost in a distant country. Because God just wants us to come home.

Does this mean that there are no consequences for our journey away! No, for such journeys often bring their own consequences, as it did for the younger son. And does this mean that we don't need to confess? Again the answer is no. Because unless we confess, we don't recognize how distant and desperate we are. Confession is the beginning of the journey home. And when we get home, God interrupts our confession with his welcoming and restoring embrace, and celebrates.

When I pulled into the driveway, put down the kickstand of my banged up bicycle, and limped slowly into the kitchen, my face puffy and bleeding, carrying that cursed K-Mart bag with a ping-pong paddle inside, there stood my mother, her mouth opening in astonishment. Yet it wasn't astonishment of disappointment and anger and judgment. It was astonishment of compassion. In fact, I don't remember whether she ever mentioned the ping-pong paddle, nor am I sure if I ever confessed properly. All I know is that as I lay on the emergency room table, the doctor putting stitch after stitch into my upper lip, I had plenty of time to think about it. And I still have the scar to remind me of that journey, and how good it was to be home.