

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, C

### My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I wonder if the younger son was surprised when his father gave him his inheritance. This is not like asking for an advance on an allowance. The son's request has real significance. The son says to his father, **“You are dead to me. I don't need you. I just want your stuff.”** The son has separated himself from his father. Their relationship is now different.

The son has rejected and dishonored not only his father but the entire village. He hurt, shamed, and dismissed them. Every resident of the village now stands as a reason the son cannot return. If he returned, he would be met with anger and be in danger. Everyone - his brother, the slaves and workers, and all the villagers - thought the son was on a one-way trip - everyone, that is, except the father.

Throughout all this, the father is silent. He does not ask why the son is leaving or where he is going. He does not argue or get angry. He does not ground his son or put him on restriction. He divided his property between the two sons.

For so long, we have heard and understood this story as one about sin. We hold the two sons up as examples. The younger son, the bad son, runs away and does even worse things. The older son, the good son, is always at home and never disobeys. The implication is obvious: Be the obedient slave-like child to your heavenly father. The difficulty is that

the whole good and bad contrast rarely transforms lives. Love, however, can and does transform lives.

Be a good, obedient child. Is that all this story says? Is this story even about the sons? Maybe this story is more about the father than the sons. Perhaps this story is more about love and grace than sin. Luke introduces the story by saying, “**A man had two sons.**” From the beginning, the focus is on the father. Although we do hear about the son’s journey, it is always in relation to the father. The father is the one who even made it possible for the son to leave. To the extent that this is about the sons, it is primarily about the sons as recipients of the father’s love.

The father’s love is so strong and big that it does not possess the other but is willing to let go. His love is so strong and big that it makes no demands but is willing to wait patiently. It is a love that forgives and welcomes home. His love will not rescue us out of or stop us from going to the distant country. Instead, it redeems the time spent and the life lived in that place. That is good news for those of us who travel to faraway countries, and we all go there at some point.

Some write notes and run away from home, some ask for and squander their inheritance, and some, like the older son, fume in silent resentment. Sorrow, grief, and loss take some to distant countries while fear, shame, and embarrassment take others there. Some will travel to faraway countries by way of addictions and self-destructive behavior.

For others, the journey of guilt, self-condemnation, or even self-hatred ends in a distant country.

However we get there, the distant country is that place in which we are lost, dead, and hungry. In a faraway country, we are lost to ourselves, empty of meaning, and starving for life, love, and hope. We are not ourselves in the distant country, at least not our true selves. Life stinks in the distant country. That is the grace of the distant country. While we may go there, we eventually come to ourselves and discover that it is not a place we want to stay.

Regardless of why we go there, what we have done there, or the time spent in the distant country, we can always go home. If we go home, we will have to face the villagers. We will meet all those many voices that live within us. **“You don’t think you could go home, do you? They don’t want you there. You are covered in pig stink. They would not take you back. You are not worthy. You never were.”** The only way home, it seems, is to deny that we are our father’s children.

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”**

The father, however, knows that love is the real way home. That is why the father runs to meet his son. He is there to protect him from the villagers and see him safely home. The father stands between his son

and the villagers. The best robe. Sandals. A ring. The banquet. Over and over, the father recommits himself to this runaway-come-home.

Where are you? Leaving home? The father offers freedom, and you are loved. In the pig pens of life? The father waits patiently, and you are loved. Coming home? Father will protect you, and you will be loved. Finally, home? The father has prepared you a banquet, and you are loved. It matters not where we are on this journey. The father trusts his love for his children more than he does the words, decisions, and actions of his children. How can we do anything less? **Amen.**