

March 30th 2025 - Rev Jo Smith

So, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. And if you know anything after your time in church, you know it's not for the usual Passover holiday. He's walking straight into betrayal, rejection, suffering, and death. He knows what's coming. And yet, here he is, stopping along the way to tell stories about lost sheep, lost coins, and lost sons.

Why?

Because Jesus isn't just walking to Jerusalem; he's walking into the very heart of God's mercy.

The Setup: Who's Listening?

Let's back up a second. Before Jesus launches into this parable, Luke tells us exactly who's in the crowd: tax collectors and sinners on one side, Pharisees and scribes on the other. And the religious folks? They're grumbling. *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

And Jesus—who never wastes an opportunity—basically says, *"Oh, you wanna talk about sinners? Great. Let me tell you a story."*

And he gives them this masterpiece of a parable—about a young man who demands his inheritance early (which is basically telling his dad, *"I wish you were dead."*). He runs off, burns through the money like he's just got his first credit card, and ends up in the gutter, starving, humiliated, and smelling like pigs.

And then—only when he's out of options—he decides to go home. Not as a son. He knows he's blown that. But maybe as a hired servant. At least that would mean food. SO he heads for home.

And that's when we get the moment.

The father sees him while he's *still a long way off*.

Which means what? It means the father has been looking for him. Watching the horizon every single day. And when he sees his son, he *runs*—throws his arms around this filthy, wrecked kid and won't even let him finish his apology before shouting, "*Somebody get this boy a robe! And a ring! And kill the fatted calf because we are throwing a party!*"

Jesus could have ended the story right there. But he doesn't. Because this isn't just a story about one lost son. It's also about another.

The Other Son: The One Who's Lost at Home

The older brother hears the party and refuses to go in. And let's be honest—most of us get it. He's the responsible one. The rule-follower. The one who didn't run off, didn't squander everything. And now, the father is celebrating *that* kid?

So, the father goes out to him, too.

"Look, I've been slaving for you this whole time! I never got a party!"

And the father—who apparently has nothing but love to give—says, "*Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate. Because your brother was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.*"

And then the story just... ends.

No resolution. No neat bow tied around it. Just an open-ended question: *What will the older brother do?*

So, Why Does Jesus Tell This Story on His Way to Jerusalem?

Because *he is the Father in the story*.

Because he is walking straight into Jerusalem to do exactly what this father does—running toward lost, broken people with his arms wide open.

He tells this story on the way to Jerusalem because Jerusalem is where he will embody it completely.

He will sit at tables with tax collectors and prostitutes, eating and laughing and treating them like they belong—because they do.

He will challenge the older brothers of the world—those who think they have earned God’s love by being good and who resent grace when it’s given freely.

And then, he will stretch his arms out on the cross—the ultimate running embrace of a God who loves *before* we repent, *before* we get it right, *before* we even know how lost we really are.

He tells this story on his way to Jerusalem because *this* is what he’s about.

Not fairness. Not keeping score. Not making sure the “right people” get in.

But mercy. Grace. Reckless, undeserved, party-throwing love.

So, Where Are We in the Story?

Are we the younger son, running on empty, afraid we’ve blown it?

Are we the older brother, standing outside, arms crossed, demanding justice?

Or are we still somewhere on the road, not quite sure if home is really an option?

Wherever we are, the good news is this: the Father is already running toward us.

And that changes everything.

Amen.

Lost and Found and Still a Mess

So, Jesus tells this story about a kid who basically tells his dad, "*You're worth more to me dead than alive. Can I just have my inheritance now?*" And because this is a parable and not real life, the dad actually says yes.

Which is wild, right? I mean, I have two kids, and if either of them pulled that stunt, I'd be like, "*Yeah, no. But thanks for the laugh.*"

But this dad? He hands over the cash. And off goes the younger son to live his *best life*—which, as it turns out, is mostly about setting money on fire in the dumbest ways possible. Booze, bad friends, bad decisions—until he's broke, and the only job he can find is feeding pigs.

And this is where Jesus' audience—who were good, kosher-following Jews—would have been gagging. Pigs were unclean. Feeding them? Eating with them? That's as low as you can go. And this kid is so hungry, he's literally staring at pig slop like, "*That actually looks kinda good.*"

And that's when it hits him: *I could go home. Maybe Dad will take me back—not as a son, but as a hired hand. At least they get bread.*

So, he rehearses his apology speech. You know the kind. *"I'm sorry, I messed up, I don't deserve forgiveness, but I promise I'll do better. I'll work really hard."*

Ever prayed that one?

So, he sets off, dragging himself back home, practicing his speech the whole way.

But before he even gets to the driveway, his father sees him. And Jesus says the father *runs* to him. Like, before the kid even says a word. Before he can grovel, before he can beg, before he can explain. The father *runs*.

Now, keep in mind—grown men in the ancient world *did not run*. It was undignified. But this dad doesn't care. He hikes up his robes and takes off sprinting like a total fool, arms wide open, pulling this filthy, starving kid into a bear hug.

And the son starts his speech—*"Father, I have sinned—"* but the dad's not even listening. He's too busy yelling for a robe, for a ring, for a party.

Because that's what grace does. It interrupts. It cuts you off mid-sentence, throws its arms around you, and says, *"We're done talking about where you've been. You're home now. And that's all that matters."*

Cue the older brother.

The kid who did *everything right*. The one who followed the rules, who stayed home, who worked hard, who was responsible.

And when he hears the music and dancing, he's pissed.

I get it. Some of you do, too.

Some of us grew up believing that being good was the whole point. That if we just followed the rules, if we just did everything right, then we'd earn God's love.

And Jesus is like, "*Yeah... no.*"

Because this story isn't actually about the prodigal son. And it's not about the older brother, either.

It's about the father.

The one who refuses to play by our rules of fairness. The one who loves beyond reason. The one who says to both sons, "*You are already mine. You've always been mine. Whether you're lost or found or still a mess, I'm not letting go of you.*"

Because the truth is, most of us aren't just the prodigal or the older brother. We're both. We run, and we resent. We waste grace, and we try to earn it. We break things, and we judge others for breaking things.

And through it all, God is standing on the porch, arms wide open, saying, "*Come inside. There's a feast waiting for you.*"

Amen