

Life in the Far Country
Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, March 18, 2007

Upon meeting me for the first time, and hearing my distinctive voice, people invariably ask where I'm from. I smile wanly, for I know what's coming, and answer, "I'm from San Antonio," which is often followed by some version of, "No way. You've got to be from England. Your accent sounds British." Well, I'm not British. My family comes from England, but that was back in the 1640s. I grew up in San Antonio and consider that my hometown. Then people will tell me what a great city San Antonio is and how they just love it and how lucky I was to grow up in such a beautiful place. I didn't think any of those things at the time. Yes, the city is home to the Alamo and the Riverwalk and lots of fun things to do. But the city always seemed small to me: small-minded and parochial and uninteresting. As a boy, I dreamed of life in a far country.

Somehow my mind fastened on England. Maybe it was the fog-draped London of Sherlock Holmes or the windswept moors of Jane Eyre or the ivy-covered walls of Oxford. Perhaps it was visions of kings and queens in splendid castles or simply peasant shepherds grazing flocks on sun-dappled hillsides. It could have been the crack of a cricket bat and crisp white uniforms on a village green or the odor of fish and chips along the Brighton sea front. I don't know exactly what it was that beckoned me to that royal throne of kings, that scepter'd isle, ... that blessed plot, that earth, that realm, that England,¹ but its allure was powerful.

Perhaps you, too, have dreamed of life in a far country. Perhaps for you it is the alpine majesty of Switzerland or the tropical rainforests of Brazil or the exotic temples of Viet Nam or the wildlife of the Serengeti. The far country, wherever it is, represents adventure and a new start, terrain unexplored and previously unknown, life free from care and worry.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act 2.

Jesus tells a story of a young man who had dreamed of life in the far country. He came from a well-to-do home and lived a life of privilege, wanting for nothing. But the far country beckoned to him. So one day he approached his father and asked for his share of the inheritance, which amounted to one-third of his father's considerable estate. It was a bold, indeed a presumptuous move, asking up front for whatever his father willed to him after his death. Without complaint or recrimination, his father divides his property and gives his son his share of the estate, which the son promptly liquidates and converts into cash. With that, he packed his bags and headed for the border and a new life in the far country.

Of course, as Alan Culpepper observes, "From a distance, the 'far country' can be very appealing."² Certainly the young man found it so, for he had soon squandered everything he had on what the NRSV politely calls "dissolute living." The noun form of this word means wild, loose, riotous living. When it appears in 1 Peter 4:3, the Contemporary English Version says, "You went around drinking and partying and carrying on." When his cash ran out, however, so did the party. To add to his woes, famine struck that far country, and he was forced to look for a job. The only work he could find was as a contract laborer, feeding another man's pigs—vile, disgusting, degrading work for a boy from a good Jewish home. The Scriptures had declared pigs unclean, and the rabbis had pronounced swineherds as cursed. He was so desperate for something to eat that he would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating. For all intents and purposes, "The son has become a nonperson,"³ the far country a mirage. The land of his dreams had become a nightmare.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 304.

³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984) 248.

It was there, in the mire of a pigpen in the far country, “the land of captivity,”⁴ that the young man at last came to his senses. Suddenly, thoughts of home came flooding back, and he recalled that “many of [his] father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here [he was] dying of hunger!” (15:17). Finally, he realized that he had made the wrong choices, that perhaps he never should have left home, for in leaving home he had left himself. “What is farther away,” asks Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, “than to depart from oneself, and not from a place?”⁵

Where once the far country had beckoned to him, now it was thoughts of home. But as the American novelist Thomas Wolfe has written, you can’t go home again—at least not as the person you were when you left. Having come to his senses, the young man experienced both a realization and remorse; he realized what he had done to his father and regretted his conduct. As he began the long journey home, he composed an apology, and rehearsed it over and over again. “Father,” he planned to say, “I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands” (15:18-19).

Perhaps he was saying this to himself, and deep in thought, when his father spotted him, still far off in the distance. Dropping everything, the old man ran out to meet his son, threw his arms around him and began to kiss him. “Father,” the lad said, “I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But that’s as far as he got. His father interrupted him and said, “That doesn’t matter now. You’re back, and that’s all that matters.” He sent his servants off to bring the best robe, and a fine ring, and some sandals for the boy’s feet. And he ordered them to kill the fatted calf, that they might have a feast, “for this son

⁴ Philoxenus of Mabbug, “On the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit 1” in *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, vol. III, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 249.

⁵ Ambrose of Milan, “Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7:213-214” in *Luke*, ACCS, NT vol. III, p. 248.

of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (15:24). And with that, just about the biggest homecoming celebration you have ever seen got underway.

Right then the young man’s older brother came home from work, and as he approached the house he could hear the band and the sounds of dancing. “What in the world is going on?” he asked one of the servants. The man replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound” (15:26). The older son could not believe his ears, and flew into a rage, refusing to go near the house. When his father heard about it, he went outside and began to plead with his son to come and join in the celebration.

“Listen here,” the son snapped. “I’ve worked for you like a slave for I don’t know how long. And what do I get for my trouble? You’ve never even given me so much as a goat to share with my friends. Now this son of yours—who has devoured *your* property, with prostitutes no less—has returned, and you throw a party for him!”

“My son,” his father said, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (15:31-32).

That he was always with his father came as cold comfort to the older boy. He was a good and loyal son, doing what was expected of the eldest, never disobeying a single command of his father, working—always working—to make the farm more productive and his father happy. He had never left home, never known the joy and the agony of the far country, never known what it means to live irresponsibly and spend foolishly and have a night on the town. All that was his father’s would be his, and that had to be safeguarded and protected and dealt with responsibly. He was a young man who was far from lost, for he lived—outwardly—at home with his father.⁶

⁶ Schwiezer, 249.

But if it is true that sometimes the greatest journey is the distance between two people, then the older son also lived in a far country—far from the joy that comes from unexpected grace. By the principles of justice and fairness, his virtue should be rewarded and his brother’s vice punished. Now, however, “Grace seems to abrogate justice.”⁷ The eldest son had lived for so long in the country of expectation and demand, hard work and merit, that compassion had become a stranger and sympathy an alien. He would not even recognize his brother. “The uncomfortable feeling lingers that perhaps there is still one lost son.”⁸

The far country can be an alluring place, but it can also be a lonely one. Some of us venture eagerly to the far country that promises to let us get away from it all, where we can squander our inheritance in riotous living. Others of us have exiled ourselves to the far country of ceaseless labor and perpetual responsibility, an iron land of unremitting care. All the time the Father is at home, anxiously awaiting the return of his prodigal children, running out to meet them at first sight, throwing his arms around them and welcoming them back into the family. And to those who have elected to remain at home, who have labored long and served faithfully, the Father says, You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Both children are loved, and both are welcome. There is room at the feast for both. Come, he says. It is necessary that we celebrate and rejoice, for the one who was dead is alive again, and the one who was lost is found.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 186-187.

⁸ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 209.