

Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

There are hugs and then there's hugs. As far as hugs go, this one has to be right up there. Five-year-old Ayaan Naeem stood quietly with his family after the burial of his father and brother who were both victims of the mosque shooter. Sergeant Stuart Martindale approached him and crouching down gave him a big tight hug. They met at the Memorial Park Cemetery last Friday. Sergeant Martindale tells the story. "My nephew," he said to Ayaan, "now you're part of my family. This is your uncle as well. You can give him a hug." The young boy held out his arms and hugged him tight.

In our reading today Jesus gives us the most famous hug of all time. This story we call The Prodigal Son follows a criticism of Jesus for spending time with sinners or dirty people. In the story the determined younger son rudely asks for his inheritance now. Then he travels away to foreign parts and squanders it all on loose living. In the end he has nothing and gets the most degrading job possible - feeding pigs. Jews had no love of pigs. So, he hatches a cunning plan, "I will go home and pretend to be sorry. My father is pretty soft and he will take me back."

The phrase "coming to himself" in verse 17 is a medical phrase suggesting a return to his right mind. His words of repentance are carefully spoken and rehearsed. But before he can deliver his little speech - in fact while he was still far off - his father sees him. The father is filled with compassion and runs to greet his son. Then comes the hug. Embracing the son, he says, "Quickly bring him our best robe, put the family ring on him, sandals on his feet and cook the fattened calf. For this son of mine was dead, now he is alive. He was lost but now he is found."

What makes the story all the more remarkable was that in the patriarchal families of the Middle East no father ran anywhere - everyone came to them. The son is restored in every sense: clothed, the ring of the family, the shoes of the wealthy and the very best of food.

There are so many levels this story works on that it is hard to know where to begin.

As the story is told, the most important character is not the lost but rather the one who diligently, tirelessly searches for the lost and whose actions bring restoration and a joyous home coming. We call it the tale the prodigal son but it is really the father whose love is prodigal. If you are like me and don't have clue what prodigal means, it means superabundant. God's love for us is superabundant.

This story which Jesus told is often described as the Gospel in miniature because in it we see the utterly reckless, compassionate love of the father.

The phrase “when we were still far off,” sums up the Christian life. We only need to journey a little bit towards God and God does all the running. It’s enough to want to want God and God does all the work. Many of us wander far and wide from our homes in God, but God still welcomes us home. Even if our homecoming speeches are carefully rehearsed to impress and not from the heart.

The collects we say each week come from a book I wrote called “When We Are Still Far Off.” Rebecca, our daughter, said it should be called, “When We Are Still Far Off from Publishing”!

This prodigal father has inspired people across the centuries. St Augustine, one of the greatest minds of Christianity, could relate to this story. Born in 354AD Augustine had a terribly wayward life until he came to faith. He wrote: *"Too late have I loved you, O beauty ever ancient, ever new, too late have I loved you. I sought for you abroad, (like the prodigal son,) but you were within me, though I was far off. Then you touched me, and I longed for your peace, and now all my hope is only in your great mercy. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they come to you."*

Of course, if we don’t associate with the wandering of the younger son then we have the elder brother to see ourselves in. Jealous, he says to the father, "Listen dad, all these years I have been working like a slave for you I have never disobeyed your command, yet you haven’t even killed a young goat for me that I might party with my friends, but when this young son of yours, (notice he denies he is his brother and names him ‘this son of yours’), who has devoured your property with prostitutes comes back you kill the fatted calf."

This attitude of jealousy and possessiveness reminds me of the woman in a parish a long way off who came to me to complain that I had allowed the church to be used for a non-parishioner’s funeral. She complained, "I have been giving to the church all these years, cleaning the brass, my husband even mows the lawns, and these ones who have nothing to do with the place turn up for a funeral. They even had the organist."

We hear the father’s compassion in his answer. “Son you have always been with me and all that is mine is yours, but we celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours (notice he is brother not son) was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found."

This is the Gospel of grace. It is not carefully measured, not a reward for good behaviour, but it is full, abundant, overflowing, and knows no limits.

When he was still far off, the father ran to hug him. When we are still far off God runs to hug us.

Ayaan said after his hug and welcome into the family, "I like police." Later, after a promise of a ride in police car, he announced to the world's media, "I want to be policeman like Uncle Stuart."

Prayer

Good and gracious God your Son told the story of your loving hug.

Stretch out your arms around us too.

When we are lost, bring us home to you.

When we are resentful, bring us home to you.

In all of life, bring us home to you.

And when our life is ended, bring us home to you to dwell eternally in your grace and love.

Amen.