

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 31, 2019 | Fourth Sunday of Lent
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
Saint Paul, Minnesota
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My brothers and sisters, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The opening scene of the popular film *Love Actually* features footage taken outside of the arrivals gate of a busy airport. One of the characters narrates, saying:

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think of the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport. General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed. But I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there. Fathers and sons, mother's and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. If you look for it, I've got a sneaking feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.

Whether or not you've ever seen the movie, or remember that scene, you can probably relate to seeing folks reunited at the airport. Perhaps you've had the experience yourself of waiting for someone to get off the plane and turn the corner, making their way past security.

In late 2006 I traveled to Jackson Hole, Wyoming on a business trip. I was gone for several days, nearly a week. My partner, Hugh, and I were in the middle of what might be referred to as an epic fight. One for the ages. The argument began before I left and continued with angry phone calls from my hotel room. I don't remember what we were fighting about exactly, but I'm sure that I was wrong.

At the time we lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, about an hour's drive from the airport in Omaha. My plane landed late in the evening and I was planning on riding back to Lincoln with a colleague. However, as I walked toward baggage claim, I was surprised to find Hugh standing there, waiting for me.

He died about a year later. I still think of that moment just about every time I get off a plane, no matter where I land. As I exit the jetway, there is a part of me that hopes to be able to relive that moment, to be surprised by the embrace of unconditional love.

Unconditional love, whether from a partner, or a parent, or someone else, is unexpected. It catches us by surprise. Our minds tell us that we don't deserve such love, and as a result we never expect it to happen.

The younger son in the parable Jesus told the Pharisees was certainly not expecting the love he experienced. Perhaps he knew that his father would treat him with some degree of kindness. But robes and rings and a lavish feast? Surely he never expected any of that.

And that's one lesson Jesus is undoubtedly teaching in this text. God's love is just like the love of the father in the story. Lavish. Surprising. Unexpected. Unconditional.

We tend to focus on the son, connecting his prodigal journey with our own experiences, those times when we squandered what we had, perhaps burned a bridge or found ourselves checking Craigslist for hog handler positions.

We may enter the story there, as prodigal sons and daughters ourselves. But Henri Nouwen, the late priest and spiritual writer and others encourage us to set our gaze on the father. Because that is where the love is.

Imagine the pain he experienced, the worry he felt each day that his son was gone. Those of you that are parents surely can. Some of us in his position would have simply moved on, heartbroken by the child's selfish acts of disowning. And yet, there he waited, lovingly looking out onto the horizon day after day, eagerly anticipating his son's return.

And the joy! The joy the father experienced as he finally set eye on the one he thought might be dead. Nothing else mattered. It was time to celebrate.

Perhaps we enter the story there, in the beauty of the reunion, the hope found in the reconciliation. But do we believe that such a love as expressed in this parable is possible for us? Maybe we can get there in our head, the idea that God might love us without condition. Maybe, but I doubt it. And, beyond an intellectual understanding, we certainly have difficulty believing that such a love is possible deep within us, in our gut, in our soul.

We have too many solid examples of conditional love, tapes of hurt and brokenness to play back in our heads. Of fathers who let us down and didn't wait for us with robes and rings. Of partners or spouses who fell out of love with us. Of times when we put ourselves first, not sharing with others the love we so desperately sought and seek ourselves.

Because our human experience of love have so often let us down, it is nearly impossible to wrap our heads and our hearts around a God who loves us each and every moment of our days without condition.

And, because we believe unconditional love is so far beyond our reach, we seek out other ways to have that hole in our hearts filled. Henri Nouwen writes in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*ⁱ, "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

Some of us try to fill that hole with alcohol, or drugs, addictions that provide a fix that is not only temporary, but which further separate us from God and God's love for us. But even if you never pick up a drink or a drug, there are other ways to fill the hole. We become addicted to money, sex, food, work, things.

Nouwen says, “Our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self fulfillment: accumulation of wealth and power; attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love.” Nouwen continues, “In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father’s home. The addicted life can aptly be designated a life lived in ‘a distant country.’ It is from there that our cry for deliverance rises up.”

Addicts and alcoholics refer to that cry for deliverance as a moment of clarity. That moment when you are in the middle of the pig sty, eating the leftover scraps. In desperation, you realize that you are not living the life that God or anyone else intended for you. You become aware that as you desperately seek fulfillment outside of yourself and your God, eagerly seeking out that next fix, there might, just might, be a different path.

Hopefully the moment of clarity is long enough for you to take notice, and to begin the long walk home. It’s a path full of fear and anxiety and shame, but a path toward healing and reconciliation. And for me, and possibly you or someone you love, it can be a step toward saving your life.

The good news today is that such a path exists, a road back to the father who is waiting on the top of the hill for you. As he sees you turning the corner, coming closer and closer to home, he begins to smile. And as you come closer, he begins to dance and shout. For nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever keep our God from jumping for joy at the sight of us.

If you walk that path, the path home to God’s unceasing and unconditional love enough times, eventually you begin to believe that love actually does exist. That doesn’t stop you from forgetting, but the road becomes easier to navigate.

And, by the way, it’s much easier to navigate that path when you are not alone, but in the midst of a loving community on the same journey. So, when you get to a place where you have come to know God’s unconditional love, and I hope you have or will, it’s up to you to bring others along. Whether they be in your midst this morning, or as you go about your days. There are so many people yearning to turn the corner, to approach the father’s house and see God jumping for joy. Be the guide they need.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 42-43.