

March 30, 2025 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

***Coming Back Home* by Pastor Julio Romero**

**Gospel: Luke 15:1-32**

This story in this gospel lesson reminds me in some ways of the experience of parenting teenagers—especially that time when your child tells you they're going out on a Saturday night with friends and will be back by 11 or 12 pm. But what happens? 11 pm comes, and there's no sign of your son or daughter. 12 am comes, and still no sign. You call their phone, but there's no answer. Now it's 1 or 2 am, and still no news. You start to worry, imagining all kinds of scenarios. You try to sleep, but it's impossible. You begin to pray, and at one point, you even think about calling the police. It's not until you hear the sound of the front door open and close that your heart finally begins to rest.

Oh, the things we bear as parents! It seems the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son knew something about this. The parable says that while the son was still far off from home, the father saw him coming back and was filled with compassion. He ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him.

I wonder how many mornings, afternoons, and evenings the father had fixed his eyes on that road, hoping to see his son return. How many times did he imagine different scenarios in his mind, wondering if his son was safe? Was he well? Was he in trouble? Was he taking care of himself? Was he alive?

Did this father feel the same kind of anxiety we experience as parents? Surely he did. The fact that he kept watching for his son tells me he was worried, sad, praying, and longing for the day when his son would walk back through that door.

The father's love for his son was so deep that when he finally saw him coming home, he ran to meet him. Overcome with joy, he ran as if he were 20 years old, forgetting his chronic pain in his knees and hips, discarding his cane, and rushing toward the son he thought was lost forever—thought was dead. He embraced him and kissed him.

What a beautiful, powerful moment to contemplate—a moment of immense love, joy, and a perfect expression of a father's love for his son. There were no words of reproach, scolding, or shame. All the father valued, in that moment, was that his son, whom he thought was dead, was alive; the son who was lost had now been found.

This is in stark contrast to the older brother, who had stayed by his father's side all along. He was angry when his reckless, foolish, and irresponsible younger brother was welcomed back with open arms—treated like a hero—with a ring, a robe, and a grand feast.

There are two very different responses here: the father's and the older brother's. Sometimes, I wonder if we are like the older brother. Sometimes, I wonder if we want a merciful, loving, and forgiving God—*but only for those we think deserve it*. We all want a forgiving and loving God, but often, we want that forgiveness extended only to those we deem worthy. For people like the prodigal son, we want a God with a hard heart—one who gives others exactly what they deserve.

The older brother was shocked that his father would show such love to the son who had hurt and offended him so deeply, the son who had not been a good son. This is exactly what Jesus wanted to show us through this parable: God loves us unconditionally.

As parents, we know what it's like to wait countless hours for our children to return home safely. During that time, we mentally rehearse all the things we want to say to them about their lateness and failure to answer our calls. But once they walk through the door, all we care about is that they are back. We want them by our side. And so it is with our Heavenly Father—He wants us home, by His side. No matter how long the road back may be, no matter what we need to change or repent of, God our Heavenly Father wants us back with Him.

For the prodigal son, the journey back home was long, and even before he started, he was planning to prove himself to his father—hoping to show that he had changed, that he had repented and learned from his mistakes. As he walked that long road, I'm sure he thought about his father's reaction. He probably feared a cold reception, reprimands, and perhaps even humiliation. Imagine how shocked he must have been when his father greeted him with such warmth, giving him a ring and a robe to reaffirm his place as a beloved son.

To say the son was shocked is an understatement. He was overwhelmed by his father's love and forgiveness.

None of us should be afraid to come to our Heavenly Father. None of us should expect anything less than pure love and forgiveness from Him. We hear that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son to save us, but I wonder if we truly grasp the depth of those words.

Some people refuse to believe they can be saved because of their past actions. They think God won't forgive them. These people think exactly as the prodigal son did. To anyone who feels this way, I say: Don't be afraid to return to God. We can begin walking toward our Father in heaven, confident in His love and forgiveness. What matters is that we keep walking toward Him, changing our ways. In the end, we will be embraced, loved, and forgiven by God. **Amen.**