

Mapping the Sacred: The Paths of Community & Place

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

There are two kinds of loneliness.

The first kind happens when you are far from home.

The second happens when you are standing in your own house and feel like you do not belong.

Jesus tells a story about both.

But the story begins, as many of Jesus' stories do, with a small irritation.

A group of religious leaders notice something about him that bothers them.

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Not *talks* with them.

Not *teaches* them.

He **EATS** with them.

As we heard last week when Jesus was accused of the same behaviour: Meals matter.

A meal is a geography of belonging.

Where you sit says something about who you are.
Who you eat with tells the story of where you belong and
who your people are.

And Jesus keeps placing himself at tables that respectable
people would avoid.

So, Jesus tells a story.

At first it sounds like a family story.

A father.

Two sons.

A broken relationship.

A long road home.

But beneath the surface, this is also a story about **Place**.

And it is a story about **Community**.

Two of the sacred paths we are exploring this Lent through
Mapping the Sacred.

Because every human life is shaped by these two
questions, whether we name them or not.

Where do I belong?

And who belongs with me?

The **Path of Place** reminds us that spirituality is not just
something that happens inside our minds or hearts. It
happens somewhere.

In houses and neighbourhoods.

In forests and streets.

In rooms where memories accumulate and stories are told again and again.

Place roots us.

The **Path of Community** reminds us that we are not meant to live our lives alone. We are shaped by the people who know us, who remember our names, who sit with us at tables, who notice when we disappear for too long.

Community holds us.

And Jesus' story begins with someone who loses both.

The younger son asks for his inheritance.

Which, in the ancient world, is more than a financial request.

It is a relational rupture.

It is essentially saying to his father, "I want the benefits of this family without the responsibility of belonging to it."

Then he leaves.

He leaves the house.

He leaves the land.

He leaves the relationships that once shaped his life.

He leaves **Place**.

And when a person leaves **Place** long enough, they eventually lose **Community**. Without roots in a place, the relationships that once held them begin to loosen, and belonging slowly fades.

The son travels to what the story calls a distant country.

Which is not only a geographical description.

It is a spiritual one.

A distant country is any place where no one knows your story.

Where no one remembers what you were like as a child.

Where no one recognizes your laugh or your grief.

At first, it must have felt like freedom.

No expectations.

No responsibilities.

No one telling him who he should be or what he should do.

But eventually the money runs out.

And when the money runs out, the friends disappear.

Because they were never really community.

They were just proximity.

And the story says something quietly heartbreaking.

“No one gave him anything.”

No one fed him.

No one noticed him.

No one claimed him.

Because he had wandered so far from **Place** that he no longer had **people**.

Eventually he finds himself feeding pigs.

And in Jesus' time that detail mattered.

Pigs were not just animals.

They were symbols of dislocation.

To feed pigs was to live outside the boundaries of one's own people.

He is now truly lost.

Not just economically.

But spiritually.

And then comes a quiet turning point.

“He came to himself.”

I love that line.

Not “he improved.”

Not “he repented perfectly.”

He came to himself.

As if his true self had been waiting somewhere inside him.

As if identity had been wandering and finally stopped.

And what he remembers is not theology.

He remembers **Place**.

“My father’s house...”

Somewhere there is a house where people eat.

Somewhere there is a table where even the servants are fed.

Somewhere there is a place where hunger is met with bread.

So he begins the long walk home.

Meanwhile, the father is watching the road.

Which suggests something important.

The father has been watching for a long time.

Perhaps every evening.

Perhaps every morning.

Hope has made a habit of looking.

And then one day he sees a figure.

Just a shape in the distance.

A body walking slowly down the road.

And the father runs.

Which would have been shocking in the ancient world.

Men of dignity did not run.

But love does not care much about dignity.

Love cares about *recognition*.

The father recognizes the son before the son believes he can be recognized.

The boy begins his prepared speech.

“Father, I have sinned...”

But the father interrupts.

Not with correction.

With restoration.

A robe.

A ring.

Sandals.

Each one is a declaration of belonging.

You are not a servant.

You are not a problem to be solved.

You are still part of this **Community**.

The father restores not only the son's dignity but also his **Place**.

And then the music begins.

Because when a lost person returns, the appropriate response is celebration.

But the story doesn't end there.

Another son emerges from the field.

The older brother.

He has remained in the land.

He has stayed close to the house.

He has done everything right.

And yet, when he hears the music, he refuses to enter.

Which tells us something honest about the human heart.

You can live in the right **Place** and still feel excluded from the **Community**.

The older brother is furious.

“All these years I have served you...”

Notice the language.

Served.

Not *loved*.

Not *belonged*.

Served.

It turns out that proximity to the house does not guarantee intimacy with the father.

The father comes outside again.

Love always moves outward.

“My child,” he says.

Everything I have is yours.

But we had to celebrate.

Because your brother was dead and has come to life.

Lost and found.

Which are not just spiritual words.

They are geographical ones.

Lost means having no place.

Found means being brought back into belonging.

Jesus ends the story there.

We never find out whether the older brother enters the house.

The ending is unfinished.

Which means the ending belongs to us.

Because every community must decide how wide the circle will be.

Every community must decide whether the music will play only for the deserving.

Or whether the music will welcome the lost.

The **Paths of Community** and **Place** ask us to consider something important about our spiritual lives.

Faith is not just about belief.

It is about *where we belong*.

The soul needs geography.

Not only physical geography, but relational geography.

Places where our names are known.

Places where our absence would be noticed.

Places where we are allowed to arrive imperfectly.

Many people today live like the younger son.

They have left home in search of freedom.

But somewhere along the way freedom turned into isolation.

They have money.

They have experiences.

They have mobility.

But they are quietly hungry for *belonging*.

And many others live like the older brother.

They never left.

They remained inside the structure.

Inside the church.

Inside the routines.

And yet something in them feels uncelebrated.

Unseen.

As if they are standing outside the party of their own lives.

Jesus' story speaks to both.

To the wanderers.

And to the faithful who feel forgotten.

To those far from home.

And to those who stayed but feel alone.

Because the deepest truth of the story is this:

The father never stops watching the road.

The house never stops being a place of return.

The table never disappears.

Home remains possible.

Even after terrible decisions.

Even after wasted years.

Even after resentment has hardened the heart.

The music is still waiting.

But every sacred path has a shadow; even the **Paths of Place and Community**. The very things that give life can, if we are not careful, become places of exclusion.

The shadow of **Place** appears when rootedness turns into possession.

When the language of home becomes the language of territory.

We begin to say, "This is OUR place," and quietly mean, "And not yours."

Places that once nurtured belonging become guarded spaces.

Neighbourhoods grow suspicious of strangers.

Churches begin protecting traditions more fiercely than they protect people.

The shadow of **Community** appears differently.

Community can nurture us, but it can also become a circle that is too tight; where everyone knows the rules but no one says them out loud.

Belonging begins to depend on being similar enough, agreeable enough, safe enough.

People learn to hide parts of themselves, and the community that is meant to heal becomes a place of quiet loneliness.

The older brother in Jesus' story lives in that shadow. He never left the house, yet he still feels outside the celebration.

This is why the father matters so much. He refuses the shadow. He runs toward the son who left and walks toward the son who stayed but feels forgotten.

He keeps widening the circle, because the sacred purpose of **PLACE** is not to keep people out, but to make it possible for people to come home.

And this is where Mapping the Sacred invites us to pay attention.

Where is **Place** in your life?

Where do you experience rootedness?

What streets, rooms, or landscapes remind you that you belong to the earth?

And where is **Community**?

Who are the people who know your story?

Who are the people who would notice if you disappeared for a while?

Because spirituality without **Place** has nowhere to root itself.

And spirituality without **Community** starves.

The sacred grows best in soil.

And soil is made of relationships.

The good news of this story is not that the younger son perfected his repentance.

It is that the father kept the home alive.

The good news is that the door remained open.

And the music was ready. As was the fatted calf.

Which means the sacred invitation of Lent might sound like this, especially those who feel like their living in the shadow of **Community** or **Place**:

Come home.

Come home to the places where your life can take root again.

Come home to the communities where your name is known and your story matters.

Come home not because you have solved everything or earned your way back, but because belonging was never meant to be a reward.

Belonging is grace.

And for those of us who are already inside the house, there is another invitation.

Open the door wider.

Notice who is still walking down the road.

Notice who is hungry for a place to stand and people to stand with.

Because the sacred work of the church is not simply to guard the house.

It is to keep the lights on, the table set, and the music ready.

So that when someone finally gathers the courage to come home, they do not find a locked door.

They find a **Community**.

They find a **Place**.

And they find that the celebration has already begun.

Amen.