

Lent 4C 2025  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
The Rev. Dr. Kathy Kelly

Some of you have met my poodle, Roxie. Her birthday is today. She is now turned 12. She came to live with us about a year ago when her owner died at 100-years-old. It was a tough transition for her, and me too to be honest. But after almost a year together, we are starting to bond.

Roxie has a lot of energy for a 12-year-old dog. She gets the zoomies most afternoons and runs around the living room like a wild banshee. She also has a little spin around dance she does for her dinner that is awfully cute and sometimes earns her extra treats. Spin, spin, hop, hop. Spin, spin, hop, hop.

She greets me with this dance at the back door every time I come through it. Now, I tend to work from my home office quite a bit. But then I'll come over to the church office in the mornings when Barb and Thomas are here and then I go back over there and I get the dance. But then I'll usually run back over to the church for a meeting, then back home, and get the dance yet again. Then I'll likely do this two or three times more before the day is over, dance, dance, dance. And then I run my personal errands in the evenings and get the dance again. Every time I walk through the door.

I can't tell you how much I appreciate this huge greeting each and every time. It is as if I am coming back from a very long time away, perhaps I have even risen from the dead in Roxie's mind. It is so wonderful to have another creature that happy to see you when you come home!

Coming home should be this wonderful for all of us. Every time.

When soldiers and sailors come home from battles of all kinds, we greet them with the equivalent of a Roxie dance and spin round and round with joy. When parents come home from work, children from school, students from college, old friends, extended family, coming home is one of the greatest delights in life.

And we all look forward to that final homecoming when we get to heaven. I imagine Roxie will be there for me, and she'll have found my other 3 or 4 dogs and taught them a full choreography. I'm looking forward to that.

But coming home isn't always so great. Not for lots of people.

Most of us can tell a story of going home with disappointment or grief after a loss of some sort. Some go home in shame. Some to care for our elders or siblings or children who have fallen ill. Sometimes going home is a hard thing.

It certainly was for the prodigal. He failed miserably in his first try at life. But he decided if he must live out his days as a slave, he would fair better in his father's servitude because at least his father treated his servants well.

And, of course, we know the rest of the story. We just read it. We love this story. We grew up with it and turn to it again and again, especially in times in our lives when we too must face our shameful selves and do our penance.

Going home is a huge metaphor for us in life. And it is easily applied to our faith. That is why this story comes up during Lent, to remind us that we all have times in life when we need to face our darker selves.

Henri Nouwen, that famous Dutch priest who wrote many books about our faith, was, by some measure, obsessed with this story. In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1992), he used the parable and Rembrandt's painting of the story as frameworks. (You'll remember that Rembrandt was also Dutch.)<sup>1</sup>

Nouwen begins his reflections by describing his visit to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (1986) where he was able to sit before the original painting alone, for hours and contemplate its meaning. Considering the roles of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Philip Yancey, "Henri Nouwen, The Wounded Healer", in *Soul Survivor: How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive*, Doubleday, 2001, p. 293.

father and both sons in the parable in relation to Rembrandt's biography, he later wrote this reflection:

Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger. When, during the last years of his life, he painted both sons in *Return of the Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father. But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt's painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.

This is what we do with art: paintings and music and theatre and film - we put ourselves in the story of it. Which character do you relate to the most? Parables are meant for this sort of projection - the healthy kind. It is our way of self reflection, hopefully in order to grow. Mostly to consider how we are doing with our effort to join the Kingdom of God.

And of course, if we are serious about growing and joining God, that means we have to change.

If you'll notice, in the lectionary gospel reading for today in your bulletin, there are a few verses missing in this passage from the 15th chapter of Luke. Verses 4 through 10. We'll come back to these this summer. I guess the lectionary committee decided to cut this for time or maybe so we can focus on the parable of the prodigal son, but for now I'm going to break some lectionary rules and read those missing verses for you. Jesus said . . .

<sup>4</sup>“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ <sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

And here's the second parable that we skipped this morning:

<sup>8</sup>“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

So, in this lesson for this 4th Sunday of Lent, we actually have three parables at hand, not just the prodigal. Jesus tells two other parables in response to the criticism of the Pharisees who suggest he dines with people from across the track, people a Rabbi should avoid. And Jesus bets bold and, again and again shows them a new way of looking at neighbors and neighborhoods.

A few of years ago, I preached on that other passage, the one about the one sheep out of 100 getting lost and the shepherd leaving the 99 and going after the one (Matthew 18:12–14) and (Luke 15:3–7). When I preached on that story, I had a profound experience. The Holy Spirit said in that sermon, somehow through me, that we humans each tend to imagine ourselves as the lost sheep in that parable. We want God to come looking for us. We want this all the time. We expect God is going to come looking for us when we get lost or screw up or squander our gifts, talents and inheritance.

But I suggested in that sermon that we should act instead like the shepherd and, instead of waiting to be rescued, we should ourselves go looking for all the lost sheep in the world. Rather than act like we're the ones who are lost, we ought to be working to find all those other lost souls and bring them home.

There was a philanthropist in the congregation that day. His son had just gotten sober and the philanthropist was looking for a project - out of his own gratitude for his own son getting saved. He took that one image of becoming more like the shepherd than the lost sheep and he created a fund raising tour which he

began that next week and a year later we had a new addiction treatment center in that town which he helped to build.

We are all the prodigal son at times, taking our treasure and giving it away frivolously until we have nothing left. The good news here is that if we are the prodigal son, our parent is God - and God is always waiting expectantly and hopefully for our return.

God throws a feast and rejoices and dances like my poodle each and every time we come home.

There is an underlying theme here, though. In the great family of God, of which we are all a part, it is OK to let others receive praise and celebration. Sometimes we are the prodigal, but sometimes we are the older brother. In those moments, let's do our best to remember that God's love and grace is enough for all, there is no shortage, and we can celebrate the return of a brother or sister without fear of loss.<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing we cannot do when we are following Jesus. But rather than trying to figure God out, we need to just breathe God in each day as we follow Jesus, each trusting step of the way.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Markham PhD, The Very Rev. Ian S.; Gottlich, Samantha R. E.. Lectionary Levity, Church Publishing Incorporated. Kindle Edition.