

Well if that isn't one of most well-known and beloved  
of all of Jesus' parables.

We know how it goes, right?

There's the father with the two sons.

The youngest makes the audacious request to receive  
his inheritance early –

as if to wish his own father dead before his time!

Upon receiving the inheritance, the son – predictably –  
takes off for a “distant country” and – just as predictably – squanders it away.

Things gets so bad he takes a job feeding pigs  
(quite a come-down for a boy from a nice Jewish family.)

And just when things seem as if they can't sink any lower, they do –  
to the point where the young man considers eating  
what he feeds the pigs.

That quickly he's gone from the comforts of home . . . to a pigsty.

But then there's that wonderful axis of a sentence  
that says the son “came to himself”.

He remembers *where* he comes from and *who* he is.

He remembers *whose* he is.

And so he turns around and heads home.

But even before he gets there, his father “filled with compassion”  
runs to greet him, to welcome him home.

The son scarcely begins his rehearsed apology when the father  
asks the servants to bring out the robe of honor, and  
put the family ring on the son's finger  
to show that he's back in the fold.

Let the party begin!

But the story doesn't end there, settling for a facile happy ending.  
Just like real life, just like real families,

things get complicated and feelings get hurt.

The older son – the “good boy” – who stayed down on the farm with dad – questions why *he* hasn’t rated a big party.

“Do you have to actually leave in order to find your way home?”  
he seems to ask.

“Do you have to leave in order to find your way home?”

The father assures the older son that he too is welcomed with open arms. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, the father insists, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he once was lost but now is found.

On a gray, snowy day thirteen years ago  
I heard this very parable read at the funeral  
for the son of one of my dearest friends and colleagues.  
For as long as I’d known her, her son Donny had been a heroin addict.  
He had been gone, he had been lost, for a long, long time.

I assure you that during all those years  
no expense was spared, no lead not pursued,  
and no prayer left unsaid  
to try to get him back.

But one day in early March thirteen years ago, he died.

At the funeral at a lovely Episcopal church in Rhode Island,  
his brother read the parable we heard today.  
The whole thing was devastatingly emotional, of course;  
but I swore I heard the brother’s voice crack  
reading the part where the father puts the ring  
on the returning son’s finger.

It turns out I’d heard correctly.  
It turn out that the family – a very old-fashioned family listed  
in the New York social register (yes, there really is such a thing) –

has a special ring for every son to signify their family identity.  
But Donny hadn't been given his ring when he came of age:  
They were afraid he'd hock it to buy drugs.  
Withholding the ring was that family's version of "tough love".

The other brother had received his ring on schedule  
and was wearing it at the funeral as he read that parable.  
The father, sitting in the pew, was wearing his too.  
And Donny?  
Donny was at last wearing his ring.

One way or another, the prodigal comes home.  
Brokenhearted as they were (and had been for many years),  
this family knew their son was, finally, home.  
Not in the way they ultimately wanted, but home just the same.

He who had been dead all those years had come to life, eternal.  
He was lost, but now was found.  
Not a facile happy ending, but real life in a real family  
where things get complicated and feelings get hurt.

God in Christ is with us through it all, never giving up on us,  
"filled with compassion" to meet us more than halfway to bring us home.  
Indeed, God in Christ came *all* the way into this mortal life  
(or, as today's collect says, "came down from heaven")  
in order to know all the losses, the heart-aches and joys we know.  
So that wherever we or our loved ones find ourselves,  
God is there with us.

Maybe some of us have loved ones,  
or aspects of our own lives,  
that are as lost and God-forsaken as any prodigal son.  
We know what it's like to be lost, one way or another.

Or maybe we're more like the other son who stays down on the farm,  
who wears the family ring his whole life,

and stands up in church to read the lesson.  
Just because we look somewhat put together on the outside  
doesn't mean we're not lost inside.  
It doesn't mean there's not a hole of bitterness gnawing away in us.  
Just because we're here right now  
doesn't mean we don't need to be found.

Or maybe we're like the father, lost in his own way.  
He'd scarcely regained one son  
before facing the possibility of losing another.  
Like my friend that grieving mother,  
lost in the reality that despite our best efforts  
there are things we cannot control.

Or, well, maybe we're like any of the three at any given time.  
Real life where things get complicated but all is not lost.  
Real life where God's unconditional, extravagant, *prodigious* compassion  
meets us right where we are,  
to bring us back to our true selves,  
to remind us who and whose we are,  
and to welcome us home.

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