

I told you last week that I'd just as soon ignore the suggested lectionary text, but this week's text is a favorite of many--including me. It's a story every parent identifies with. It's a story anyone who's ever needed forgiveness understands. If you're an older brother or sister, you get it. If you're the younger brother or sister you feel it. If you're the good child who isn't appreciated as much as you think you should be, you identify with the big brother. And if you're the younger sister (who had to grow up in the shadow of the "perfect" older sibling) you know how hard it is to measure up.

But mostly it is a story about "the compassionate parent." It's about the parent who never gives up--no matter what. It's the parent who's always looking down the road for her child to return, who every time the phone rings, prays that their child is OK--that's its not the police on the phone, that there's not been an accident and it's the child just calling to say "I'm on my way home." It's the parent whose arms are always, always open -- who longs to embrace her baby girl with the words "Welcome home."

Anyone who's been a parent knows what I mean. Anyone who's served in a parental role, even if they weren't the biological parent, knows what I mean. Once a parent always a parent. Being a parent is often like an unrequited love affair. It is a never-ending story of a loving, compassionate parent. It is God's story, too!

Luke tells the story of our compassionate parent, God. It can be God the Father, or God the Mother. It doesn't matter. Except that whether it's Father God or Mother God, it is always compassionate God.

God is always peering down the road hoping to catch a glimpse of us coming up the road. The arms of God are never by her side, they're always like this: [open arms]. God always has one ear listening for the phone call hoping to hear we're on our way home and we're almost there.

And when we've messed up, God is always ready to forgive because it's not messing up that's as important as whether we still want to come home again.

My father used to sing a song that went like this: "Coming home, coming home, never more to roam, open wide your arms of love, Lord, I'm coming home."

The great anthropologist Margaret Meade said that the most basic of human needs could be described as the longing of the human soul to know that someone is waiting for us to come home each night. Well, God always leaves the light on for us. God always cares whether our footsteps can be heard coming up the walk. God listens for the door to open and close behind us. This is what compassionate parents do. They say "Welcome home!"

It is also a story about sibling rivalry and jealousy. The older brother has been good all his life. Of course, he has nothing to worry about, because as the older son, he automatically receives half of Dad's fortune. The remaining half of the estate will be di-

vided between the younger son and all other heirs. There's no incentive for the younger brother.

What do you think it feels like to be the younger brother? His life has already been deemed second-rate. And yet, when he decides that second-rate is better than starvation, his brother is not at all happy. The "haves" of society sometimes have a hard time with compassion for the "have nots." They think it ought to be easy to do the right thing, regardless if someone's always putting you down. They haven't walked in the shoes of the younger brother.

But the compassionate parent loves both children the same. He knows love isn't conditional on good behavior. Love is love no matter what. There's enough forgiveness to go around. The compassionate parent doesn't love the older brother less because he's jealous. He just explains that when the younger brother decides to come home, it's time for a party. It's time to celebrate the whole family together again. A family reunion calls for a party. So they party down!

Some of you may be on Brother Gerald's email list as I am. Last week he copied me an email that tells another story of two brothers and the need for forgiveness. So with your permission, I'd like to read it now:

THE CARPENTER

Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side-by-side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed, without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding, and it grew into a major difference, and finally, it exploded into an exchange of bitter words, followed by weeks of silence.

One morning, there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there I could help with? Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, it's my younger brother!"

Last week, there was a meadow between us. He recently took his bulldozer to the river levee, and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence -- an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place, or his face, anymore." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails, and the post-hole digger, and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day -- measuring, sawing, and nailing. About sunset, when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge... a bridge that stretched from one side of the creek to

the other! A fine piece of work, with handrails, and all! And, the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming toward him, his hand outstretched... "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge, after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox onto his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, but I have many more bridges to build."

Today's gospel text is so familiar because we know what it's like to be all the characters in this story. Today we may feel like the younger brother needing the acceptance and embrace of our compassionate God. Maybe we're on the road home all the while singing, "Coming home, coming home, never more to roam, Open wide your arms of love, Lord, I'm coming home."

But next week we may be the older brother needing reassurance that God's love is big enough to embrace us all; that forgiveness is never diminished by its giving. We may even be like the compassionate parent who models an unconditional all encompassing love; whose arms are always extended. A love that will never ever fail. I'd like to tell one more story that illustrates this kind of love.

The novelist James Carroll tells his family's story of growing up on an Air Force base near Washington, D.C. where his father was a general. It was the height of the Cold War, and in the home was the red telephone which at any moment could ring signaling the threat of World War III. Though that did not happen, his family faced its ultimate crisis with the war in Vietnam. His brother, Dennis, was against the war, and opposed the work their father was giving the best years of his life to. At times the tension in the household was unbearable.

When Dennis became eligible for the draft, he applied for conscientious objector status. He was denied twice. If he failed in his third and final attempt, he would be faced with either violating his conscience or fleeing the country. He was told that at this final hearing he could be accompanied by his lawyer. Well, before his father had entered the Air Force, he had been a lawyer, so the son asked his father to go with him and represent him. Carroll says that at first he thought his brother was crazy. But when the day for the hearing came, his father dressed in his general's uniform accompanied his son, pled on his behalf, and C.O. status was granted. This is what it means to be loved by a compassionate parent. This is the kind of love our Mother/Father God has for us. We live all our days knowing that a light is always on in the window, lighting a pathway home, leading us to safety and warmth. We know that no matter how far we roam, there's always someone who cares whether or not we come home at night. This One is our compassionate parent who says "Welcome home!"; who is always ready to celebrate our homecoming with a party; who doesn't dwell on the past but looks to the future. And so all the days of our lives are lived in gratitude and constant praise for our God, our compassionate parent, whose love has no limitations, no beginning and no end.