

## **Runaways**

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Yr C, BCP), March 31, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" Luke 15:11b-32.*

I gather many of you are familiar with the kiosks on many college campuses, always covered with flyers: the film festival, apartment rentals, the lost cat, the cheapest shuttle to the airport. I'm recalling one now on which had been recently taped a large Ziploc bag. Staring out from it was a large photo of a handsome teenage boy, his name there in large block letters: JACOB FALKNER. There was also a note: "*Jacob, we need to talk to you. There is a message in this bag for you. Please contact us. Love, Mom, Dad & Shaun.*"

Walking through the campus, Jacob Falkner kept staring back at me out of other Ziploc bags on other kiosks until my curiosity got the best of me. I opened one of the bags and read the message on the back of the flyer.

Mrs. Falkner's message to her son began with family news: Dad's new job; Grandpa's cancer; a newly inherited piano now taking up most of the living room. But you could already feel the real motive for taping all of those flyers to all of those

kiosks. Mrs. Falkner was desperate to hear from her son. She described an '800' number for runaways. She listed phone numbers for other family and friends. And then:

*"I love you. I love you. I love you.*

*It breaks my heart not even knowing if you're alive.*

*Please call us. Love, Mom."*

Various stories and teachings in the Bible suggest that all of us have a little bit of Jacob Falkner in us. Adam and Eve were, in fact, the first runaways. Ashamed after their disobedience, they went into hiding. God went looking for them. *"Where are you?"* Those are God's very first words to humans in the Bible: *"Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9)

It didn't stop with Adam and Eve. You and I began Lent on Ash Wednesday with a message from the prophet Joel that partly reads like a flyer to runaways: *"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart ... "* (Joel 2:12)

In the New Testament, the gospel writer Luke has a particular eye and heart for runaways. Only Luke includes a story from the childhood of Jesus, and it's a runaway story. *"After three days they found him in the temple .... and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'"* (Luke 2:46a,48b)

Themes of lost and found also permeate Chapter 15 in Luke. In the opening verses Jesus is mocked by some holier-than-thou Pharisees and scribes for the company he keeps: *"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* (v. 2) In response, Jesus warms up with two short parables, one about a lost sheep, the other a lost coin, both searched for until found, and not only found, but found with satisfaction, joy and even fanfare.

And then comes the *tour de force*. *"A man had two sons."* Any of us here with siblings may already feel a knot in the stomach. The younger son in the story must have known from his earliest memories that he'd never be able to live up to all of his older brother's blue ribbons. And, anyway, forget the farm life! He wants freedom. He wants the indulgent anonymity that you can only get in the big city. *"Imagine all the good times I'll have."* And maybe he thinks he does. Have some good times. Until he hits bottom. The text says, *"he came to himself..."* Some of us will recognize that moment. The self-contempt for our wayward delusions, the hurt we inflicted on others, the fantasy that we weren't accountable to anyone for anything.

The prodigal's crash and burn is so spectacular that it's easy to miss the fact that by the end of the story the older son has also run away. He's never left the farm, but is he any less lost? He opens a chasm between himself and his father that he seems unable to bridge. He wasn't prepared for any change in the usual script ... the script in which he was always conspicuously favored.

He.

Knew.

How.

Everything.

*Should!*

Go.

And maybe you or I can remember how bitter we felt when God messed with our script, dealt us some Joker. The bad guys had all the fun and then they got the spotlight too. No one recognized or appreciated all of our hard work and how we always stuck to the straight and narrow.

This older son and his spiritual predicament may have been in the mind of the author Richard Rohr when Rohr wrote: *"I have prayed for years for one good humiliation [each] day, and then, I must watch my reaction to it. I have no other way of spotting both my denied shadow self and my idealized persona."*<sup>1</sup>

Notice in the story that the father, clearly a stand-in for God, seeks reconciliation with his older son. Having made clear that, from his point of view, there never was and is no chasm, the father leaves the older brother outside the party. The older brother will need to decide for himself, just as his younger brother did, if he will return.

*"Where are you?"*

When I decided to check out that letter in the Zip-loc bag on that campus kiosk, I initially felt voyeuristic. But then it occurred to me: Mrs. Faulkner *wanted* me to see that flyer. She *hoped* that I and many others would open the Ziploc bags and read her appeal. Anything to get the word out, to get her son back.

In a similar way, our God regularly authors and posts flyers in hopes of finding you and me. Sometimes those flyers come along in the form of personal moments: a sudden change on the farm. A prophetic word from a friend. Or one of those coincidences that are more than coincidences.

In addition to these personalized flyers, God has posted some main flyers for all humanity to read. The messages on those flyers are summarized in one of our Eucharistic Prayers: *"We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son."* (BCP p. 368) God's most telling flyer, God's own son, was hung out on the cross for all the world to read, and the message on that flyer is, *"I love you. I love you. I love you. I know you're lost, and I won't give up until I've found you – even if I have to die trying."* Amen.

<sup>1</sup> From *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Jossey-Bass, 2011.