

Lent 4C, 2010

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Title: Two Places to Live

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There are two places where you can live in this wide world- only two. They are as far apart as East and West. They are as different as night and day. You cannot live in both places at once. There are only two place to live.

The first place where you can live is your Father's house.

This is the house that you were born in. This is the house that you were raised and grew up in. This is the house where you learned to walk and to ride your bike. This house has your picture on the wall (you know, the one with the goofy haircut) and your drawings are still on the refrigerator door. This is the house where you had your family meals, where all the relatives came for Christmas and Easter and Thanksgiving. This is the house where you had your birthday parties and your friends came over to spend the night.

In this house you are home. In this house you feel safe.

In this house you are cared for. You have everything you need and more. There's always food on the table. The house stays warm in the winter and cool in the summer. There are clothes in your closet, shoes on your feet, and even some jewelry to wear for special occasions.

In your Father's house your Father cares for you and provides for you. Your Father is very wealthy and you have a rich inheritance.

But your Father's house has rules, guidelines for living. Play nice. Share. Do your chores.

These rules aren't there to punish you, but to bless you. The rules are there so that everyone gets along, so that everyone is loved and cared for. Your Father's rules are there to keep you safe from harm.

In your Father's house, everything comes to you as a gift. Everything is freely given. There are no strings attached, no need to earn or buy your Father's love. He is your Father, you are His child, and He loves you.

Now your Father does not force you to live in His house. You are free to go any time you'd like.

Now there is a second place you can live in this wide world. It is a place completely different, the complete opposite of your Father's house. That place is the far off country.

The far off country is exotic and exciting. In the far off country you can live however you please. In the far off country there are no restrictive rules, no guidelines for living. In the far off country you can be your own boss.

But in the far off country you have to earn your own way. There is no such thing as a free lunch. There is no one to take care of you, no safety, no security. You may find love and friendship, but only as much as you can buy.

The far off country is a cruel place, a harsh place. In the end, no one really cares if you live or die. It's every man for himself. You have to earn a living with what you can scrape by.

You are completely on your own in the far off country. There is no one to cook for you, there is no one to clean up after you, and if you're not careful you'll find yourself in the mud with the pigs.

The younger son was born and raised in his Father's house. He had everything he could ever need, but he was not happy. "Give me my inheritance!" He demands of his Father. "Drop dead!" is the translation. "I'm sick and tired of this place and your rules. I wish you were dead, so that I could have all your money and do with it as I please."

And so the Father lets His son have his way. He won't force him stay. There is no compulsion, no force in love, and so He lets His son go.

And the son goes to the far off country. At first, he couldn't be happier. He's on his own, he's living it up. He's finally free! Parties, friends, girls, all the love he can buy.

It's not long before the son finds out what the far off country is really like. His money is gone and so are his friends. To make things worse, famine sets in, and the son is no longer free, but a slave to the pig-farmer. He's so desperately hungry that pig slop sounds like a lavish feast, but he can't even have that. The son is poor, hungry, and alone. He's as good as dead.

And so he comes up with a plan. Now he knows how the real world works. He knows that there's no such thing as a free lunch. He's ready to earn a living, and he knows just the place: His Father's house. He'll make a deal, strike a bargain and perhaps his dad will let him be a servant.

The son has his speech all prepared; he's ready to earn his way back into his Father's house. Minimum wage will be fine with him. He'd even work just for room and board.

But things don't go the way the younger son expects them to. The Father will have none of His son's plan- no slave labor, no earning his way. Everything is still free. He is still His son's Father, and He has never stopped loving him. Love sends him running down the road, recklessly rushing to reunite with his dead son.

And so the gifts flow freely- not the pig food that the son has desired, but prime cut, grade-A, grain feed beef! Royal garments- a robe, new shoes, even a ring. Celebration! Party! Barbeque! The ultimate family reunion!

But not everyone is happy with the younger son's return. The older son, the obedient one, the good son, he was happy when his brother left for the far off country.

His little brother (that punk) was always causing trouble and vying for their Father's heart. He couldn't understand why His father had given him his inheritance early. He couldn't understand why His father just let him go to waste the family's money. And most of all, he can't understand why His father is now welcoming the little brat back with open arms.

In fact, the older brother actually refuses to enter his Father's house. He is now the one on the outside. He is the one trying to earn his Father's love through his obedience. The older son had everything, but he is so angry that he even leaves His Father's house.

His Father pleads with him to come and join the feast, but he will not force his son to come in, any more than he will force his younger son to stay.

This is your Father's House. Not only this building, but the whole church, the living house, the living temple that bears the Father's Name and Spirit.

You are all sons and daughters of your Father, with a full and rich inheritance. Here you are provided for. You are clothed with your baptismal garments. You feast at your Father's table. Your Father teaches you, loves you, gives you everything you need and more. Everything comes to you as a free gift. Your Father has rules to live by: play nice, respect and honor other people. Don't lie, cheat or steal, but love each other in the same way that He has loved you.

You are always free to leave. You are always free to go into the far country to indulge your lusts and live as you please. Just be warned. The far off country is a harsh, cruel place. You can have only as much love as you can buy. When your money runs out (and it always does), you will find yourself hungry, filthy, enslaved, lost, and ultimately dead.

Yet you always have a place waiting for you at your Father's house. He's left your room exactly how you left it. He will even come running to get you and throw a welcome home party like you've never seen before.

That's the kind of people who live in your Father's house: the runaways, the homeless, the prostitutes, the criminals.

Now if that doesn't suit you, you can always leave. It's your Father's house. It's not your house. It's not for you to decide who's in and who's out. You can't dictate to your Father how he should give out His gifts.

Our parable ends with the Father outside pleading with His son to come in. We never find out if the older son actually does come in, if he stays outside or if he is persuaded to come into his Father's house to join in the celebration.

There are only two places where you can live in this world- only two. There's your Father's house, and there's the far off country. Where will you live?