



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

On Finding Home

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 15:11-24

July 30, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Friends, in the movie “Finding Nemo,” we are first introduced to Nemo’s parents, Marlin and Coral. They are clownfish living in a sea anemone in the South Pacific. We learn that Marlin is a worrier, which is understandable given what happens in the opening scenes of the movie. Let’s meet Marlin, Coral and Nemo. [A clip was played from the early scenes of the movie.]

So, Marlin becomes overprotective of Nemo—rarely letting him out of his sight and keeping him at home. But Nemo wants to leave home, even just to go to school. When he finally lets Nemo go to school, something Nemo has been begging him to do, Marlin comes to school and humiliates Nemo. Nemo tells his dad that he hates him, then defies him and swims away, eventually getting caught by a diver who collects fish off the reef. That sends Marlin on a search for his son and hence, the name of the movie, “Finding Nemo.”

In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells three parables about being lost and found. Tom preached on two of them earlier this month: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Today’s scripture is the third—what many call the parable of the ‘prodigal son.’ Jesus says there once was a man with two sons and the younger of the sons said to his father, “Give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” He is asking for his inheritance now.

I will tell you that for the hearers of this parable, there are three distinct times when they would have gasped at Jesus’ story. This is the first one. Let’s try it. The younger son said to his father, “Give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” [Gasp] Why the gasp? Because by asking for his inheritance now, while his father is still alive, it is paramount to the younger son saying, “I wish you were dead.” Or “Why aren’t you dead yet?”

The father does as the younger son asks. He gives

him half of his wealth and the younger son goes off to a distant land and squanders it. He wastes all that money on what the Bible calls, “dissolute living.”

What is dissolute living? That’s what “prodigal” means: to spend money recklessly, wastefully, extravagantly. Well, when the money is gone, he discovers that his so-called friends disappear, too, and he is all alone. Then a famine hits the land where he is living and he is hungry, so he hires himself out as a farm-hand to feed [here comes the second gasp] what? To feed the pigs. Why is that a gasp? Because pigs are unclean. Jews do not associate with pigs so this son is living among gentiles.

Verse 17 says, “When he came to himself...” Other translations say, “When he came to his *senses*,” he decides to go back to his home and tell his father that he has sinned against heaven and before his father and that he is no longer worthy to be called his son. And he will beg him to take him back as a servant.

He makes his way back home and it says, “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion and [here comes the third gasp] ran to him.” Why the gasp? Because it was undignified for adult men, of any stature, to run.

Years ago I was attending a meeting of the governing board of the National Council of Churches in Jacksonville, Florida. We were staying at the Hyatt Regency right on the St. John’s River. Every time the governing board meets somewhere in the country, there is a mission tour on the second afternoon. Busses come, pick us up and take us to see places where the church is at work. It is the best part of the meeting and I was late and did not want to miss it. I remember going to my room to drop off my things, then taking the elevator down to the lobby, stepping out and seeing one of the busses waiting outside the revolving doors so I started to run across the lobby. A young woman in a Hyatt uniform stopped me and

said, “Sir, sir. We don’t run here at the Grand Hyatt.” I felt like I was eight years old. I think about that whenever I read that the father ran to greet his son. He’s fortunate he was not staying in the Grand Hyatt in Jacksonville. Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says the father was waiting every day searching the horizon for his son.

In “Finding Nemo,” we follow Marlin as he travels the whole South Pacific searching for his son. He meets up with another fish, a kind and compassionate blue tang named Dory who suffers from short-term memory loss, and together as a team, they make their way. Word of Marlin’s search spreads across the ocean’s creatures from sea turtles to dolphins to pelicans and soon everyone knows about Marlin’s search for Nemo. Let’s see. [movie clip shown]

Against all odds and with Dory’s help, Marlin finds Nemo. But then Dory gets caught up in a fishing net and Nemo helps free Dory. [movie clip shown]

Nemo is found. And the prodigal son comes to himself and is celebrated because, as his father says, “My son was lost and now is found.” In the story of the prodigal son, when the son comes home, the father tells his servants to put a robe on him, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and throws a party because his son was lost and is found.

It is a terrible thing to be lost. On Sept. 11, 2001, when two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, my friend Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner was pastor of the Tenaflly Presbyterian Church in Tenaflly, New Jersey, just across the George Washington bridge in Manhattan. In the hours and days that followed, the Tenaflly Church lost 11 members in that attack. One of them was Alex, married to Jen, parent of Max who was five and adored his dad.

Eileen was a frequent visitor to the home and on the third day after searching hospitals and the morgue, they realized that Alex was not coming home. Eileen was at the home with other family members and friends and Jen turned to her and said, “Eileen, I can’t tell Max. Would you please talk to him?” Eileen said, “Of course” and went upstairs to

Max’s room. He was playing quietly and looked up at her and smiled when she came in. Eileen sat on the floor next to Max and said, “Max, I need to talk with you.” Max got up and sat in Eileen’s lap and leaned into her and said, “It’s about Dad, isn’t it?” “Yes, Max, it is,” said Eileen. “There are a lot of people in the house,” Max said. “Yes, there are,” Eileen said. “I’ve been hearing them talk about Dad. They’re saying he’s lost. That’s why he hasn’t come home.” “Yes, that’s what they’re saying,” said Eileen.

Max smirked and said, “They don’t know my Dad. He never gets lost. He always knows where he is.” Then Max looked up at Eileen and said, “You know I think happened?” “What, Max?” Eileen asked. “I think Dad died and went to heaven and is with Jesus. That’s why he hasn’t come home.” “Yes, Max,” Eileen said. “I think so, too.” “I’m going to miss him a lot,” said Max. “Yes. I will, too,” said Eileen.

“We’re going to have to take care of Mom,” said Max. “Yes, we are,” said Eileen. “And we will take care of you, too.” Max thought about that and then said, “You know, Pastor Eileen, there are worse things than dying. Being lost is one of them. My Dad is not lost. He’s home with Jesus. And one day I’m going to see him again.”

It took a journey across a whole ocean for Nemo to find his way home. It took traveling to a distant land for the prodigal son to find his way home.

Home. I think that word meant something more powerful to Nemo and to the prodigal son after their journeys. For Marlin, too. For many of us, it is a place of safety, a place of comfort. It may not even be a physical space—after all, the aphorism says, “Home is where the heart is.”

But here is what Jesus’ parable tells us. Ultimately, home is where you are always welcomed, forgiven, celebrated, loved. Friends, trust this. Whether you find yourself across an ocean or in a distant land, ’tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.