

Their son had left home! He left home because he was tired of living according to someone else's rules and he wanted to be free to choose his own life. His parents were filled with the pain of a broken heart. Not surprisingly, their son ran out of money, ran out of friends and ran out of options. He hit bottom and could not find the way back up.

He wrote a letter to his parents back home:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I have been the cause of much pain. I have sinned against you, against God, and I'm not worthy to be called your son. There is no reason for you to love me or to welcome me back home. But, I am at the bottom of the barrel and I am hoping to come back home... if you will have me. I have been given a ticket for a train to get me back home. It's the line that comes around the bend and right past our farmhouse. If you want me to come back home, please put a white sheet on the clothesline, out in the backyard, near the tracks. That will let me know if you want me back home. If there is no sheet, I understand. I will know it is not right for me to come home.*

A few days after sending the letter, the young man got on the train, heading home. As he came closer to home, he became more nervous, pacing back and forth, up and down the aisle of the train. As the train drew closer and closer to his backyard, he couldn't take it. To the man sitting next to him he asked: *"Sir, around the next bend there will be a farmhouse on the left, a white house, with an old red barn behind it. You'll see a broken down fence. There will be a clothesline in the backyard. Would you do me a favor? Would you please look and see if there is a white sheet hanging on the clothesline? I know it sounds strange, but I can't bear to look."*

The young man's heart was racing as the train edged around the bend. And the man sitting next to him shouted, *"Look! Look! Open your eyes!"*

And there, at the bend in the tracks, was a clothesline COVERED in white sheets! And the barn roof was covered in white sheets. And the broken down fence was covered in white sheets! There were white sheets everywhere!

The mother and father, hurt by their son leaving home, were reaching out to welcome him home.

The pain of a parent when a child is lost may be the worst kind of pain and agony. The love for a child remains imprinted on a parent's heart. That is why the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a story about GREAT PAIN and even GREATER JOY.

The pain of the father giving the son his inheritance and letting him go, leaving his family behind.

The pain of the older son, filled with anger and resentment, directed at his father and his selfish brother. He is held hostage by his own self-righteous hatred.

The pain of a father who may never see his son again and, the pain of the father when his other son refuses to celebrate his brother's return.

And here is the irony, to be as compassionate as our God is compassionate can be painful. As the author Henri Nouwen put it, *"Open up your hands and the world will drive in nails."*

To understand compassion, is to feel the pain of the father over the reckless behavior of his younger son and the resentful behavior of the older son. Every parent can identify with this pain. We hope for more from our children! And when it doesn't go the way we hope it will, we experience what it means, in all its pain, to love our children.

Although there are many messages in the story of the Prodigal Son, the central theme is that God's heart overflows with compassion and love. God's heart breaks open on the cross when Jesus cries, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."* The love of Jesus is more than we can even begin to define. It is a love that no matter what, will SEARCH for us, will FOLLOW us, will WAIT for us and when we round that bend will WELCOME us home! It is a love that WILL NOT LET US GO!

*"Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. Come home, come home!"*

This is the love that we see in the waters of baptism, in the bread and wine. And as we receive that love, how can we not practice compassion, exercise care, sympathize with the pain of the world, walk with others through dark valleys, help others when they are weak, and watch around every bend in the tracks, for the welcome sign of the white sheet?

What is the care and compassion of God? We are welcomed home! The white sheet is hanging from the tree, the fence and the rooftop. And in just a couple of day, the white sheet will hang on the cross. Come HOME! Welcome HOME!

God's house is open and the feast of victory awaits us all.

Let us live this Lent as found people, pondering our purpose, proclaiming our place in God's family, praising God for His gracious love, and, heading straight for the Resurrection.

And all God's children say,

Amen.

**Sola Deo Gloria!**