

*Come now, Holy Spirit, in wisdom and in truth. Illumine our minds. Enliven our hearts. Kindle our imaginations. Help us to hear the word you have for us today, and to leave this place inspired to greater faithfulness to you. Amen.*

August 11 marked the one year anniversary of the tragic suicide of legendary actor Robin Williams. After his death last year, there was an online blog post circulating by the non-profit organization To Write Love on Her Arms. To Write Love on Her Arms is a movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury and suicide. TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire, and invest directly into treatment and recovery. The founder, Jamie Tworkowski, didn't set out to originally start a nonprofit organization. All he wanted to do was help a friend and tell her story. When Jamie met Renee Yohe, she was struggling with addiction, depression, self-injury, and suicidal thoughts. He wrote about the five days he spent with her before she entered a treatment center, and he sold T-shirts to help cover the cost. When she entered treatment, he posted the story on MySpace to give it a home. The name of the story was To Write Love on Her Arms. The title represented a goal — to believe that a better life is possible for all people. The organization believes in the following: You were created to love and be

loved. People need other people. Your story is important. Better days are ahead. Hope and help are real.

Jamie has since written a book called *If You Feel too Much*, which is now on the Ne York Times bestseller list. He is known for his passionate blog posts and story telling writing style. When he heard about the death of Robin Williams, he said the following “i knew i wanted to write something that night, but i didn’t want to write about the life or death or Robin Williams. i wanted to write something to people who could perhaps relate to the pain that Mr. Williams knew. i wanted to ask them to stay.”

His blog post was entitled “There is Still Some Time.” It’s one of the most read posts on their blog and I’d like to share it with you this morning:

“If you feel too much, there’s still a place for you here.

If you feel too much, don’t go.

If this world is too painful, stop and rest.

It’s okay to stop and rest.

If you need a break, it’s okay to say you need a break.

This life — it’s not a contest, not a race, not a performance, not a thing that you win.

It’s okay to slow down.

You are here for more than grades, more than a job, more than a promotion, more than keeping up, more than getting by.

This life is not about status or opinion or appearance.

You don't have to fake it.

You do not have to fake it.

Other people feel this way too.

If your heart is broken, it's okay to say your heart is broken.

If you feel stuck, it's okay to say you feel stuck.

If you can't let go, it's okay to say you can't let go.

You are not alone in these places.

Other people feel how you feel.

You are more than just your pain.

You are more than wounds, more than drugs, more than death and silence.

There is still some time to be surprised.

There is still some time to ask for help.

There is still some time to start again.

There is still some time for love to find you.

It's not too late.

You're not alone.

It's okay — whatever you need and however long it takes — it's okay.

It's okay.

If you feel too much, there's still a place for you here.

If you feel too much, don't go.

There is still some time.”

“There is still some time to be surprised.” is the line that sticks out to me. How many times have you felt alone? How many times have you felt you had to fake it? How many times have you wandered so far away and felt so stuck? How many times have you wondered if the love of others or the love of God would ever find you? The good news is that there is always time for us to be surprised, and there is always time for us to find the love of God no matter how far we stray, and I think that becomes quite clear to us in today's parable about the prodigal son; a parable which seems to be chock full of good news and surprises.

The Good News that Jesus talks about sometimes is so hard for us to hear though, isn't it? Sometimes it even seems impossible. That's because Jesus is often talking about it in parable - and we know Jesus talked in these parables which make everything a bit more complicated than we are used to. John Dominic Crossan, Christian theologian argues that parables

show the fault lines beneath the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we make for ourselves (Feasting). Parables are unsettling. They challenge the reconciliations with which we have become comfortable. The ones we have created, and parables replace them with a deeper level of reconciliation— a reconciliation that is contextually situated at the level of the incarnation — of God ACTUALLY with us.

These parables grab us because they are stories that are similar the everyday stuff of our lives. They relate to us - they talk about family, work, money, and strike us right at the heart of the matter. These stories are sacred because they are how we come to understand who we are in relationship to ourselves, others, and God. And even as familiar as these stories are, this parable in particular is full of surprises no matter how many times we've read it or heard it. It still takes us by surprise.

We are surprised when the younger son asks his father for his inheritance before the father's death. This is a dishonorable request in almost any culture. We are surprised that the elder son says nothing and we are even MORE surprised when the father goes along with the request. Imagine the conversation that was going on after those sons went to bed between the mother and father. "What on EARTH were you thinking?"

But that's not the end. We continue to be surprised. We are surprised that the younger son turns the property into liquid capital, and blows the entire inheritance. Probably made some not-so-smart investments, some big spending and i'm sure experienced a bit of wild living. When the inheritance runs out, he is then reduced to slopping hogs and missing home, a kind of exile that is not envied by anyone.

Then we reach the part of the story that sometimes is the most surprising - the son returns home. Feeling like a nobody, he is determined to return home and hopefully feel like a somebody when he does return. He has a plan to enter back into relationship with his family, and when he returns, his father welcomes his home with open arms. A glorious homecoming. He gives his son multiple signs of reconciliation - a robe, a ring, and sandals which in that time marked the young son as family. And then the biggest surprise? The father ensures reconciliation with the entire village by throwing a party. There's a huge radical table fellowship that includes everyone - a party with a roasted, fatted calf as the literal centerpiece of the celebration.

And then of course we have the elder son's reaction which was not one of pleasure when he comes back from the fields to find out that his

younger son was welcomed back with a party all while he has been working! However, exploring the thoughts of this elder son is a whole other sermon for another day.

Let's go back for a minute about the part where the younger son is welcomed back by his father. Jesus at the time was telling these parables and was preaching to the people while the scribes and the pharisees listened and questioned how he was sitting with the tax collectors and the sinners and welcoming them to the table — practicing radical table fellowship where all are welcome. How on earth could he do this? Yet the tax collectors and sinners were there, listening to this parable, where the son - the prodigal, the lost, the exiled, is welcomed home. Imagine how these nobodies of society felt - they saw that they could be welcomed into the kingdom at heaven and that there is a place for them at the table.

This parable is about reconciliation with God - the God who constantly is flinging wide the gates of generosity. That no matter who society tells us we are, no matter how long we are gone, no matter how far we away we go, and no matter how hard we fall, we will be welcomed back into the arms of God and there will be celebration. We are welcomed home because God, who like the father in the parable, waits for us to come home,

and then celebrates in joy. We might fall from justice, faith, and righteousness, but we cannot fall from grace. We cannot fall from that love that is there from the very beginning. It is that prevenient grace that John Wesley talked about — that divine grace and love that comes before. It is there prior to and without reference to anything we as humans may have done. It's that light on the porch that is always on and no matter how far we run, the light will still be there, and when we come back and enter the house, there will be celebrating.

But let's think for a minute about what it must have been like for that younger son to come back to such celebration. We know that God was celebrating, and that the younger son was coming home determined to make right what he had done wrong. But I wonder what it felt like for that younger son when he had made all those troubling choices and was exiled to slopping hogs and missing home. I read an article on *On Being* with Krista Tippett, an NPR broadcast website this week entitled *Mommy Comes Home: On Seeking, Finding, and the Bliss of Being* by their columnist Omid Safi that seems to speak exactly to this notion of what the younger son must have been feeling.



The gist of the article is that the author had to babysit for his brother's children who were a toddler and an eight month old at the time. He describes how watching the toddler was super easy. There were lots of other cousins around so there were lots of activities: Imaginary games, superheroes, leaping off of beds, giggling, and tons of laughter.

However, he describes how for the eight month old, it was a different story. He writes, "some parents speak of a 'separation anxiety,' of the child preferring the company of a parent (most often the mother). This wasn't quite that. This was something more primal. It was an aching, a tearful sense of being cut off from the god/goddess/mother/food source/source of all comfort/source of who she is. This was angst and pain and loss all wrapped into one. We, the dutiful loving family members - who are still definitely notthemommy — took turns.

We rocked her. We walked with her. We sang to her. We bounced her. We went outside. We came inside. We tried putting on a show. We fed her. We changed her diaper. We made silly faces. We let her on the floor. We picked her up from the floor. #Epicfail. Nothing helped."

We've all been there, haven't we? Watching a child who just couldn't be consoled. My sister was one of those who couldn't be consoled until

mom or dad came home. The author said that after what seemed like hours, Mommy. Came. Home. As he heard the door open, he made sure to sit and watch the sweet child's face. He kept watching the face as everyone went over to greet the parents, and the baby's eyes were scanning the room, still crying, when she saw her mommy. He said, "it took one second, maybe less. In the middle of the tears came a pause, and, just like that, the tears gave away to first a smile and then to something else: joy, relief, faith, ecstasy."

The author describes the moment of homecoming, of tears turning into existential joy as one that seemed bigger than a child and a mother. He says, "it opened up. It was as big as our whole human condition. It felt like each of us finding God. Finding spirit. Finding our own self. Finding our own sense of worth. We so often think about the prodigal son story, but how rare to do we see the story from the child's point of view. I wonder if we are like this," the author asks, "I wonder how often we are running around, teeth gnashing, hearts breaking, existentially lost and in despair. We have forgotten about God, forgotten about what it means to be fully truly human. We are in tears and agony. And then, we catch a glimpse of love. Of God. Of our own true selves."

The author finishes with a poem:

“It is like this, my dear beloved,

My own true self,

My friend

My love

When we find Him,

Her,

God,

Self

Spirit.

Tears... agony....angst....gone.

Joy. Comes.

Ecstasy.

Seeking. Finding.

And then there is nothing you want to do, other than to be.

The time comes

When you find

And life is blissful.

The time comes

When the Mommy of your spirit comes home.

Seek this one.

Find Her. Find Him.

Become Her. Become Him.

And be blissful.”

How often do we feel like we are in agony - running around gnashing our teeth and having our hearts breaking? How often do we feel like giving up and giving in? How often do we think there's not enough time? How often do we feel so alone in our feelings? How often do we feel like that eight month old - wanting so badly to have mommy come home yet it seems like it will never ever happen? How often do we feel we are having an existential crisis and will never find our way out? Those are the moments where we have to remember that there is still some time to be surprised, like Jamie writes. There is still some time for love to find us. And when we do feel that way, those are the moments when we find ourselves running as fast as we can into the arms of our loving creator. Those are the moments when life is blissful, when our tears turn to existential joy - those are the moments when we find God. The one who loves us unconditionally

and who will celebrate with us when we return — no matter how long we've been away and no matter how far we've fallen and no matter how far we have run away. God will always welcome us home, reminding us that we truly are loved - we are somebodies and there is nothing we can ever do to have that love taken away.

May it be so. Amen.