

Looking for signs on a tree

A story of forgiveness and grace is told by James Merritt, lead pastor of Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Georgia, and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

A preacher was riding on a train and trying to study for his message the upcoming Sunday when he noticed a young man who was exceedingly nervous.

The pastor found the right opportunity to address the young man, and said, "Son, you seem so troubled. Is there something I can do to help you?"

The response: "Mister, may I tell you my story? I had a terrible argument with my parents many years ago, and I left home. I swore and declared that I would never come home again. I have not written my parents nor seen them in many years. They are getting old now, and I realize that I have been such a fool, and I want to see them before they die.

"I wrote them a letter and asked them if I could come home. I told them I would be on this particular train. The tracks run right past our house. I told Mom and Dad that if I could come home, if they would just take me back, then just hang a white cloth on the old tree out there by the railroad tracks. If I see it, I'm going to get off when the train comes into the station. But if I don't see it there, Mister, I'm going to keep on riding."

The preacher said, "Why are you so nervous?"

"Well, I don't know whether the cloth will be there or not," the young man answered. "I am so afraid it will not be that I hate to look."

The preacher understood. "Son, when we get close to that tree, you just close your eyes, and I'll watch for you. I'll let you know what I see."

Just a mile from that tree, the young man closed his eyes, and the preacher sat there with a prayer in his heart: "Oh, God, let there be a cloth on that tree. Dear God, for the sake of this young man, please let there be at least one white handkerchief on that tree."

The train rounded the bend, and the preacher's eyes got wide. He shook the young man excitedly, and said, "Look, young man, look!"



(more)

On that tree the mother had tied every pillow case, every sheet, every piece of white cloth, every handkerchief, everything she had that was white – from the top of the tree down to the bottom. It looked like a snowstorm had hit it.

That story calls to mind the parable of the Prodigal Son that Jesus told. There are three lessons Jesus intended to teach all of us in His account:

- No matter how far away you have gone, you can come back.
- No matter how far out you have gone, you can come in.
- No matter how far down you have gone, you can come up.

When you do, God will be waiting with outstretched arms. The door is always open.

As Jesus told the older brother in the parable: *It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found* (Luke 15:32 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter