

WHO? ME?
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
June 20, 2010

Reading: Luke 15: 11 – 32 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and to my father and I will say to him, ‘Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ So he went off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am not longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

A father passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see the bed was nicely made and everything was picked up. Then he saw an envelope propped up

prominently on the center of the bed. It was addressed, "Dad". With the worst premonition, he opened the envelope and read the letter with trembling hands:

Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with mom and you. I've been finding real passion with Joan and she is so nice even with all her piercing, tattoos and her tight motorcycle clothes. But it's not only the passion dad, she's pregnant and Joan said that we will be very happy. Even though you don't care for her as she is so much older than I, she already owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter.

She wants to have many more children with me and that's now one of my dreams too. Joan taught me that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone and we'll be growing it for us and trading it with her friends for all the cocaine and ecstasy we want! In the meantime, we'll pray that science will find a cure for AIDS so Joan can get better; she sure deserves it!!

Don't worry Dad. Someday I'm sure we'll be back to visit so you can get to know your grandchildren.

Your son,

Benjamin

P. S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at the neighbor's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than my report card that's in my desk center drawer. I love you! Call when it is safe for me to come home.¹

Father's Day has often struck me as a celebration we are supposed to have because Julia Ward Howe thought up Mother's Day. David Letterman said the other night that Father's Day was in the third tier of holidays. I guess it only seems fair that we remember our fathers. The problem is that more often than not the sentiment around Father's Day is different from Mother's Day. Mother's Day is often affectionate and charming. Fathers are not thought of a sentimental and it seems to me

¹ Author unknown. www.netglimpse.com, downloaded 6/18/10

that the way we deal with it is mostly by humor. It kind of reminds me of the story told by Anne Carlson. She wrote that her 16-year-old brother, Ryan, was out late with friends one night. Suddenly he realized it was Father's Day and he had not even bought a card for his dad. He rushed into the local super market but was disappointed to find that there were only two cards left. He selected one and took it home to his father.

He looked somewhat sheepish as his dad opened the card. Dad read the message, "You've been like a father to me." He looked quite puzzled.

Ryan tried to explain, "Well, Dad, it was either that one or the card that said, 'Now that I'm a father too!'"²

This morning I would like to approach Father's Day with a different possibility that suggests itself from the parable of the prodigal son. It is a well-known parable to all of us who grew up in the Christian tradition. In fact I think we know it so well we do not think too seriously about it.

I am guessing that most of us grew up with an understanding of this parable that was focused on the son who demanded his inheritance, squandered it, and returned home to his father. The parable was allegorized to suggest that all of us are prodigal children and we need only return to the heavenly father where our sins will be forgiven. More recently, scholars have paid more attention to the elder son who had

² Anne Carlson, "The Right Choice," from *The Joke's On Dad*; Readersdigest.com. <http://www.rd.com>. Downloaded 6/18/10.

worked hard all of his life and resented the fact that despite his obedience and goodness his father had never thrown a party for him.

Henri Nouwen makes two observations about this treatment of the parable.³ Nouwen was a psychologist, Catholic priest, activist, and teacher. His book, *The Wounded Healer* was one of the most influential books in my seminary studies. Nouwen has devoted two books of meditations on Rembrandt's painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son." That is the painting on the front of your bulletin.

Father Nouwen first observes that most of us can identify with both of the brothers, especially the wayward son. There is a story about us that we would rather close the book on. There is some sexual indiscretion, or criminal activity, or drug use that we would rather not mention. And there is always the scandal of money and credit squandered. There is something of the prodigal in all of us. Yet somehow we returned to our senses and went home.

There is also something of the elder son in many of us. We have worked hard all of our lives. We were obedient to our parents. We turned our homework in on time and graduated with honors. Our financial accounts are in good order and we have saved for the future. But for all of our hard work and careful living we are not happy. Though undoubtedly secure in many ways, we are somewhat bitter that life has not been more fun. We had rather hoped that people would extend us at least the courtesy of gratitude. Is it too much to expect a little appreciation or congratulation?

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992).

We find ourselves accusing others of wanton living while we secretly wish we could “burn a little town or slay a dozen men, anything to laugh again.”

Now the truth be told, there is something of the prodigal son and the elder brother in all of us. Both personalities and both souls sense alienation from the father. It turns out that neither is happy. We can identify with both of these brothers. We can see ourselves in both of their roles. We find ourselves in their respective places.

We may even share the glow that our spiritual condition has been identified in this parable. The Carpenter has put his finger on my wayward tendencies and my rigidity. I can take my exposed condition to God and know that I am loved and I am back home in the house of grace. In fact, some of us may stay in that role indefinitely because we glory in the fact that we are understood and received.

The story invites us to identify with the characters. We can all identify with one or other or both of these brothers. But what about the father? Can we identify with the father and take on his role? Who? Me? Henri Nouwen was confronted by a friend of who said, “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.” Continued Nouwen:

“Her words stuck me like a thunderbolt because, after all my years of living with the painting and looking at the old man holding his son, it had never occurred to me that the father was the one who expressed most fully my vocation in life.”⁴

And just as Nouwen’s friend challenged his view of himself and called him to a higher vocation, so am I challenged by these words. The invitation is to find ourselves in the

⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

character of the father – to identify with that heart broken old man who waited anxiously for his children to come home. Can we imagine ourselves celebrating for the prodigal and holding hope for the elder?

You might be thinking, “I cannot assume the role of the father. I cannot presume the character of God.” That might be true if this is an allegory. In allegory a character stands for another person. As allegory the prodigal son represents wayward and lost sinner. The father represents God. I believe this is a misrepresentation of Jesus narrative. The story that we call the “prodigal son” is a parable about the kingdom of God. The parable suggests that in God’s realm the followers of the Way act very much like the compassionate and forgiving father. Perhaps entitling this the “parable of the prodigal son” is a misnomer. By misnaming the parable over centuries our attention has been focused on the wrong character.

It is better titled, “the parable of the loving father.” This shifts our orientation to the father and calls us to our true vocation as loving men and women, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, and cousins.

What does it mean to be a loving parent? The parable teaches us several things about loving parents: (1) The father does not presume to set the course of his son’s destiny; (2) the father is painfully patient with his child and the choices the boy is making; and (3), the father’s love is stronger than his anger with this child.

As a father and grandfather I want the very best for my children. I want to help them to the extent of my ability. That does not mean I can set the destiny of my

children. Each one is unique. Each has his or her set of skills, kind and level of intelligence, and personality. Each one also has limitations and flaws. Like every parent I have imagined what they might become. Throughout my parenthood I have tried to keep the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran in mind. Specifically I refer to his wisdom poem, "On Children."

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you.

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,

Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them.

But seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children

As living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,

And He bends you with His might

That His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
 So He loves also the bow that is stable.⁵

The father in this parable could only be the stable bow that lets his children fly into the future. He could not coerce or demand the child's trajectory, even when he knew that the child's choice could bring pain and suffering. In the kingdom of God we cannot command the future of our children, of one another, of our church, or of our community. It reminds me of this little story of an unknown author.

Baby girl is born with wings!

Neighbors think it's awful, tell parents that having the wings removed is best for the child.

Parents content to let be, send neighbors away.

Child grows, wings grow, neighbors return. Neighbors suggest clipping wings – “in order not to hinder child's growth.”

Parents, still content, send neighbors away again.

Child grows, wings grow, neighbors return.

Neighbors want wings to be bound up. They said, “We are only thinking of the child's welfare. What can you be thinking of?”

Parents answer, “We're thinking of teaching her to fly.”

As a human being, as a man, as a father, and as a minister I have been working on the patience project most of my life. I don't think we have any choice but patience if we are going to trust our children to their own future. In fact, I do not think anyone has a future without patience. I get reminded of this every day.

⁵ Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1963), pp. 18-19.

Two years ago I took a field of an acre or so and planted it in native grasses. Formally it was used to grow wheat, soy, and milo. My friend, Ron Hatchett, disked it for me and helped me plant the seed. It came up in the spring of 2008. At first it seemed uneven and thin. I wondered if I needed to replant it. The sight of broadleaf weeds confirmed my worries. In the spring of 2009 it was more flush and I was tempted to put the horses on it. But the County Extension agent said I needed at least 18 months. So I waited patiently until the fall before I turned the horses out. This spring the stand of grass was even healthier and continues to thicken.

Raising children requires such patience as we try to plant the right seeds, worry about the weeds, and grow anxious about the results. And very often patience means letting go and letting nature take its course. We do our part and trust the future to God. We have no other choice, really. If we have prepared the soil, planted the right seeds, and been patient our children will thrive. And when they stray there is a good chance they will come to their senses and return home. If we give them a solid foundation and the right tools they will make the right choices. It reminds me of a story told by Charlotte G. Alexander. She wrote:

“Before I took the old family car to college, my father loaded the trunk with soft-drink bottles filled with oil, coolant, and transmission fluid. Sure enough, my car overheated. Scolding myself for not listening to my father’s instructions, I looked at the engine and saw how well he knew me. The oil cap was labeled “Dr. Pepper,” the transmission stick “Coke,” and the empty coolant container “Diet Pepsi.” I finished the trip safely.”⁶

⁶ Charlotte G. Alexander, “Thanks for the Soda, Pop!” from *Reader’s Digest*, “The Jokes on Dad.”

Coming to terms with the destiny our children will choose for themselves and learning the discipline on patience leaves us vulnerable as parents. We cannot help but worry, especially when we know that the choices our children are making are foolish, imprudent, and even dangerous. Like the father in this parable we find ourselves standing at the window anxiously waiting for their safe return home. Such is the kingdom of God, and so our love extends to every person in it.

In the kingdom of God the anxiety and the anger give way to the greater compassion of forgiveness and welcome. I think of the story of Steve Backman and Chris Loukas. In 1994, 39-year-old Steve Backman was depressed and drinking heavily. On the rainy night of January 28, a very drunken Backman got into his car and headed down highway 116. He crossed the double yellow line and struck the car driven by Christ Loukas. The impact punctured Loukas' lungs and broke nearly every bone in his body.

Backman was arrested and charged with felony drunk driving. During the next six weeks Backman read that Loukas' medical bills ran over \$500,000. Backman was tortured by what he had done. Against all advice he went to the hospital and approached the Loukas family, asking to talk with the injured man. Loukas' wife escorted Backman to the hospital room. Loukas saw him, recognized him, and immediately said, "Open up your arms and come here."

The two men hugged and wept for nearly 15 minutes. Backman would later say, "The love and forgiveness they showed me was a miracle. Something I never knew existed. When I walked out of that hospital room I weighed 500 pounds less. I

saw everything in brilliant color when it had been black and white before.” Every year Backman and Loukas meet to celebrate the event that drove them together.

The injured Mr. Loukas played the role of the father in the parable of Jesus. That’s the way it is in the Kingdom of God. It is the father’s love and forgiveness played out by women and men just like you and me, not only for our own children but also for all of our brothers and sisters. In the Kingdom of God we find ourselves in relationships with people that are characterized by openness to the future that people choose for themselves, patience, and the extravagant offering of love and forgiveness.

Happy Fathers’ Day!

Finis