

Life Lessons From Jesus: The Prodigal Son -- The Rev. Suzelle Lynch,
Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI

FIRST READING

From the gospel of Luke, Chapter 15, verses 11 through 32. New Revised Standard Version.

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 go 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 set 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 no 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." '

SECOND READING

From "It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It," by Robert Fulghum

This is 1963.

From deep in the canyoned aisles of a supermarket comes what sounds like a small-scale bus wreck followed by an air raid. If you followed the running box-boy armed with mop and broom, you would come upon a young father, his three-year-old son, an upturned shopping cart, and a good part of the pickles shelf – all in a heap on the floor.

The child, who sits on a plastic bag of ripe tomatoes, is experiencing what might nicely be described as “significant fluid loss.” Tears, mixed with mucus from a runny nose, mixed with blood from a small forehead abrasion, mixed with saliva drooling from a mouth that is wide open and making a noise that would drive a dog under a bed. The kid has also wet his pants and will likely throw up before this little tragedy reaches bottom.... The small lake of pickle juice surrounding the child doesn’t make rescue any easier for the supermarket 911 squad arriving on the scene.

The child is not hurt. And the father has had some experience with the uselessness of the stop-crying-or-I’ll smack-you syndrome and has remained amazingly quiet and still in the face of the catastrophe.

The father is calm because he is thinking about running away from home. Now. Just walking away, getting into the car, driving away somewhere down south, changing his name, getting a job as a paper-boy or a cook in an all-night diner. Something – anything – that doesn’t involve contact with three-year-olds.

Oh, sure, someday he may find all this amusing, but in the most private part of his heart he is sorry he has children, sorry he married, sorry he grew up, and, above all, sorry that this particular son cannot be traded in for a model that works. He will not and cannot say these things to anybody, ever, but they are there and they are not funny.

The box-boy and the manager and the accumulated spectators are terribly sympathetic... Later, the father sits in his car in the parking lot holding the sobbing child in his arms until the child sleeps. He drives home and carries the child up to his crib and tucks him in. The father looks at the sleeping child for a long time. The father does not run away from home.

This is 1976.

Same man paces my living room, carelessly cursing and weeping by turns. In his hand is what’s left of a letter that has been crumpled into a ball and then uncrumpled again several times. The letter is from his ... son (now sixteen).... The pride of his father’s eye – or was until today’s mail.

The son says he hates him and never wants to see him again. The son is going to run away from home. Because of his terrible father. The son thinks the father is a failure as a parent. The son thinks the father is a jerk.

What the father thinks of the son right now is somewhat incoherent, but it isn’t nice.

Outside the house it is a lovely day, the first day of (summer). But inside the house it is more like Apocalypse Now, the first day of one man's next stage of fathering. The old gray ghost of Oedipus has just stomped through his life. Someday – some long day from now – he may laugh about even this. For the moment there is only anguish.

He really is a good man and a fine father. The evidence of that is overwhelming. And the son is quality goods as well. Just like his father, they say.

“Why did this happen to me?” the father shouts at the ceiling.

Well, he had a son. That's all it takes. And it doesn't do any good to explain about that right now. First you have to live through it. Wisdom comes later. Just have to stand there like a jackass in a hailstorm and take it.

This is 1988.

Same man and same son. The son is twenty-eight now, married, with his own three-year-old son, home career, and all the rest. The father is fifty.

Three mornings a week I see them out jogging together around 6:00 a.m. As they cross a busy street, I see the son look both ways, with a hand on his father's elbow to hold him back from the danger of oncoming cars, protecting him from harm. I hear them laughing as they run on up the hill into the morning. And when they sprint toward home, the son doesn't run ahead but runs alongside his father at his pace.

They love each other a lot. You can see it.

They are very care-full of each other – they have been through a lot together, but it's all right now.

One of their favorite stories is about once upon a time in a supermarket...

This is now.

And this story is always. It's been lived thousands of times, over thousands of years, and literature is full of tragic endings, including that of Oedipus. The sons leave, kick away and burn all bridges, never to be seen again. But sometimes (more often than not, I suspect) they come back in their own way and in their own time and take their own fathers in their arms. That ending is an old one, too....

SERMON

The parable of the Prodigal Son. I have no doubt many of us have heard it before – it's an oft-told story from the Bible, and even those of us without a Christian religious background, when we hear it, think, “Oh, yeah. I've heard that one.”

It's a compelling story. A story less about the son, perhaps, than about the father. David Middleton, a member here, calls it "the parable of the forgiving father." When I was thinking about Father's Day this year, taking a look at this parable seemed like the right way to close out our series of sermons on life lessons from Jesus.

Fathers are important. All of us had a father, at least in the biological sense. Some of us are fathers, ourselves. Some of us are close to our fathers. Some of our fathers have been lost to us by death or illness or estrangement. Some of us have or had wonderful fathers, or indifferent fathers, or absent fathers.

Some of us have more than one father, or more than one man whom we consider a father. And for some of us, it is painful to recall the man called father, or perhaps we never had someone to associate with that term, or fill that role.

I have a wonderful father. I feel really lucky that this is so. He's not perfect, by any means, but he's great. I'll say a little more about him later.

But first, let's take a look at the parable. It's a simple story, right? That's what a parable is: a simple narrative that describes a setting, a moral dilemma, the actions a character takes, and the results. Parables were a rabbinic style of teaching – the means by which one rabbi would keep current the teachings of a former rabbi. The practice was something like this – a teacher would take one of the former rabbi's lessons, expand it into a parable, and then attribute it to the revered rabbi of the past. By placing the story of the prodigal son on the lips of Jesus, the writer of Luke's gospel takes a Jesus seed, if you will, waters it and feeds it, and then promotes it for his own purposes by saying that it really came from Jesus....

What's the point of the story? Why was it so important to Luke – whose gospel was written sixty years after Jesus died? The usual interpretation is that in the forgiving father, Jesus is giving us a picture of God. No longer the judging God who insists on rules and regulations and penalties for breaking them, this god is "abba" or "daddy," whose compassion is boundless. On one level the story is clearly meant to remind us that God's love is boundless.

Our Universalist ancestors believed this -- that God loved all of God's creation unconditionally, that God's love is wider and deeper than we could possibly imagine. They believed that we, in our fallible humanness, prone as we are to making mistakes and hurting one another, do so not from an inherent sinfulness, nor from some sort of flaw in the design of our being. Instead they accepted themselves, and urged each other to have compassion for other people and for themselves. They wanted to be like God, whom they believed had compassion for all.

In the time of Jesus, the Prodigal Son story would have sent a pretty subversive message. For a son to demand his inheritance was outrageously disrespectful of

his father, because it implies that the father is dead – yet the father says yes. For the son to squander all that he is given and descend to the level of a pig-keeper tells us he's become the lowest of the low – for pigs were considered unclean animals. The father running to his son when the son finally returns home, instead of the son kneeling before his father, and the father welcoming the son back before the kid even apologized was outrageous as well. It meant that the father was behaving beneath his dignity and disrespecting his whole family line. This was deeply shameful behavior. And the older son behaves shamefully, too, by rebuking his father. But the father forgives him also.

If we were people of Judea thousands of years ago, hearing this story from an itinerant rabbi, we'd be scandalized. As my colleague the Rev. Ron Robinson writes, "In the ancient world, fathers were rulers, embedded in a direct line of sorts of authority from God ... to Emperor, (to) Governor, (to) Priest, (to) Village Chief. No humanity allowed. Their allegiance was to the one above them in the great chain of Being and their responsibility was to keep those below them in line with the divine status quo order of that great chain. (In those days) One's very sense of themselves was connected to the history and the future of the family and the family land. The way ... order (was kept) was through Honor and Shame and a heavy hand." (in "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms: Fathers and Faith," June 2004)

Not only did the prodigal son break God's laws, but his father did, too. What kind of love was this that was more important than the law which held the people in covenant with God and one another? Luke's Jesus asks his listeners to imagine that God is a different kind of father than the fathers they knew.

In our modern world, a father's love often manifests in initiation, challenge, mentoring and work. Just like mothering energy, fathering energy is available to and used by both men and women. With my own parents, I think of my first weeks at college when my mother taught me how to balance my checkbook. We had a huge fight about it – it was very much a rite of passage for both of us, and my initiation into adult financial responsibility. Several years earlier -- as a requirement for being able to drive the family car -- my father taught me how to change a tire. No matter how I struggled with the jack, lug nuts and heavy, dirty spare tire, he insisted that I learn how to do it myself. This, too, was a powerful initiation into a more mature responsibility, and a challenge he would not let me bypass.

You don't have to have children to father in this way, of course. All of us use fathering energy in our own lives, and we direct it towards others in our lives as well. Learning to father ourselves and others is an important stage in our development as human beings.

But the parable of the prodigal son reminds us that fathering requires more than challenging, initiating or mentoring. It also involves a kind of renunciation. A letting go of ego and self-concern – a willingness to put another's needs or well-being first. Fathering means being bigger than we ever dreamed we could be,

and more humble; it requires us to be mature enough to renounce our own goals and help another reach theirs. It asks us to be compassionate, forgiving; to move past pride so that we might serve something larger and more whole than our current reality.

We see this theme of renunciation in Robert Fulghum's story. The father does not run away, he adjusts to what is happening in his son's life time and again as his son grows through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It isn't easy, and the father often finds himself with mutinous thoughts, but he does not give up. Instead, he lets go of his fear, his pride, his preconceived ideas of the way his son should be, of the way he thinks their relationship should be, of the way others think he should be as a father. We're told that there's a happy ending for that father and son.

It doesn't work that way for everybody, of course. Listen to the words of Bridget Gage Dixon in her powerful poem: Prodigal Son

he took his leave of us without his divvy of the fortune
no pocket full of gold coin
to squander on cheap women
and expensive wine,
packed up his duffel bag
and caught the bus
to Parris Island
where they shaved his head
and ran him senseless
pressed his face into the muddy ground
and after eight weeks
declared he was a soldier.
My mother waited silently
for him to call,
never once complaining to her friends
how long it had been
since the phone had rung.
She'd puff her voice with pride
when speaking of him
but the truth lie just beneath
her bragging
in the way I'd find her well past midnight
rocking gently in the heavy wooden chair,
wrapped in the quilt
she had sewn for him
while he swam inside her,
and sipping hot tea
with only just the slightest tear
creeping down her cheek.
From the balcony,
I would watch her

tuck myself behind the banister
damning him.
Though she still denies it
she spent those nights
reliving moments
inspecting judgment errors
wondering if she'd yelled too much,
or not enough.
Months later
the old black phone did ring
for her
he'd called to tell her
that he'd married
and sitting on the threshold of her bedroom
I watched as she drew herself up taut
squeezing back the tears
and didn't ask why she hadn't been invited
just congratulated him
and asked the name of his new wife.
She has waited now
two decades
fattening the calf in vain,
offered countless polished explanations
of his absence
at family gatherings,
and though we've pushed him from our minds
abandoned hope for reunion
she can still be found from time to time,
as if standing at the fence line waiting,
wrapped in his quilt,
sipping tea
and rocking gently.

http://www.etext.org/Poetry/2River/2RView/4_2/poems/gage-dixon2.html

Many of us have heard stories like this from people in our lives. I know of an older couple whose 50-something daughter has not spoken to them for three years, even to tell them why she's so angry with them. They send checks to her for her birthday and Christmas, which she always cashes immediately. They are glad for this, because it helps them know she's still alive. When I was an intern minister in Dallas, I worked with a funeral home director whose father threatened to kill him when he came out as a gay man, and refused to have anything further to do with him. Yet this same father demands that his wife call the son every week to make sure he's all right.

Forgiveness is not easy to seek or to grant, nor is reconciliation a given even when forgiveness has taken place. The Prodigal Son parable ends before we

learn whether older son in the story reconciles himself to his father's actions towards his brother.

One of the defining characteristics of a parable is that it suggests in some way how we ought to behave or believe. So what does this story tell us?

It reminds us that within each of us is a prodigal. Each of us has made mistakes, has felt ourselves to be flawed and unworthy; each of us has been in need of forgiveness.

It reminds us that there is, within each of us, a character like the older brother. Someone who has played by the rules, and then cannot help but be resentful at the undeserved good fortune of someone who has broken them all.

It reminds us too that we each have, within us that spark of the divine embodied by the forgiving father.

Luke's Jesus invites us to see that we can move beyond self-righteousness, move beyond the limits of our culture and our "standards," move beyond our fears, and welcome our brothers and sisters – however flawed they may be -- into our hearts. We each have the power to reach across lines of estrangement and bring a greater wholeness into being. We each have the power to reach out to a stranger, too, and help bring a greater beloved community into being. Indeed, he reminds us that as human beings, this may be the only way we can ever touch the holy – by finding it in each other, as the forgiving father found it in both of his sons.

May we, in this community, no matter our gender, be such fathers to one another.

Happy Father's Day..... Amen.