A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 14, 2010, Lent 4, dedicated to my four children and all children of this church, my wife and all parents of this church, to Thomas Kuhn, Sr., who entered eternal life March 13, to Louise Smith who was laid to rest yesterday, and always to the glory of God!

"An Exciting Faith Embraces Love"

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

(Part V of VIII in the sermon series "An Exciting Faith")

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May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today's Gospel parable is one we know so well, we all assume we know what the text means. But do we know? Stories we all know and love often are left unprodded, unchallenged and uninteresting.

Let's look again.

This story is about a prodigal father. He has two sons. The older son knows how the world works. The younger son knows how to work the world. The one son is a classic oldest child. We all know that oldest children share certain traits. They all begin life with rookie parents. Because they are rookie parents, they make

rookie mistakes. So the oldest children have to push against the limits. They have to learn how to work and grow up much faster. In this story, the older son has learned to be dutiful, hardworking and loyal to his father.

The younger son is working his father. As opposed to oldest children, youngest children inherit parents who are veterans, and, quite frankly, like veterans their parents are somewhat tired. These old-timers have relaxed quite a bit. Younger children also inherit parents who are going through the parenting process for the last time. This is the last child who will call them "Mommy" and "Daddy." This is the last child for whom diapers will be changed, who will learn to walk, to ride a bike, and of course, who will push parental buttons. Younger children learn to play their parents like a fiddle. And they are good at it. In our parable today, the younger son is a master fiddler.

Richard Swanson is the oldest child in his family. Richard tells a story that sounds like it comes out of every one of our households.

When it came time for the ninth-grade dance, Richard's rookie parent gingerly stepped up to their notion of what his curfew should be. Then they stood firm by what they established. He argued that none of his friends had to be home that early. His father was adamant that Richard had to be home by 10 p.m. Back and forth they went. Finally, his father got up and walked out of the room. Conversation over.

Two years later, Richard's middle sister entered the ninth grade. When the dance came, his parents argued with her, but having gone through Richard's ninth-grade experience, they set the curfew at 10:30 p.m. – an equitable compromise. Richard watched and said nothing, knowing that it wouldn't change anything if he mentioned this was unfair. But his younger sister also was watching.

One year later, Richard's baby sister was in ninth grade. The dance party came along. His sister had watched this drama twice

and had taken mental notes. When the curfew conversation came up, she talked about how fun dances were. Again, her parents sought to talk about the curfew and she mentioned her favorite teacher was going to be a chaperone and she hoped they could talk about the book the class was reading sometime that night (after all, it was a "classic").

Finally, the parents insisted they talk about the curfew. The parents talked and then they negotiated with themselves. When all was said and done, his sister let them talk her into coming home at midnight, an hour and a half later than his other sister and two hours later than Richard. His sister argued that she should probably come home earlier. But they stood firm and insisted midnight would be better.

Richard comments: "I stood there with my mouth hanging open as I watched a master at work. She had my parents arguing for her to stay out later. It was beautiful." (Richard Swanson in *Provoking the Gospel of Luke,* Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2006, pp. 128-130).

The older brother in Luke's parable also was standing there with his mouth open when the younger son convinces their father that it was a good idea that they pretend together that the father was dead so that the son could fictively inherit his share of the property. That was the only way this story could work. With a percentage of the farm sold off, the younger son takes off to spend his father's hard earned inheritance. That's how big brother saw it. And he was right.

It wasn't long before the younger son had blown half of the farm value and all his inheritance on wild adventures in a far away land. It says, "He came to himself." In other words, he figured out the bottom line of hitting bottom! It doesn't say he repented of wasting his father's lifetime of work on "easy street." It doesn't say he confessed his sin. It doesn't say he went to church or synagogue and found God and religion. It doesn't say he said a little prayer to God apologizing for the bad things he had done. It doesn't say he turned his life over to God or turned around in any way.

All it says is he recognized he was hungry, out of cash and perhaps most humiliating for any Jew, he was feeding pigs who were eating better than he was. With that, he rehearses his confessional speech to his father and heads home. As he reaches what's left of the farm, his father sees him and runs to his side. The speech he has been muttering under his breath the whole way only gets half way out of his mouth when his father, having seen him at a distance and having run to meet him, declares, "My lost son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found . . . Let's party!"

But, before we get too excited about the party, and the father's love, let's remember the prodigal father has two sons. The older son comes home from yet another hard day of work and hears the music playing and smells the unfamiliar, but glorious smell of a cookout, and he asks one of the slaves what is going on. (I would not want to be the one to answer that question). "Your brother has come home, so your dad is throwing a party!" Big brother shares no delight in the return of little brother. All he can see and smell and hear is a future of smaller estate, harder work, sale of more his future inheritance for a drunken fool of a little brother. He sees his brother now living off of his inheritance. And he sees his father being played again.

Baby brother has come home – not to penance, but to privilege. It's bad enough that he has wasted father's estate, but he isn't required to do anything for his wasteful ways. Rather, he is celebrated. Do I hear, "Injury added to insult?"

When the older son confronts his dad, the father listens to everything he screams. There is nothing rehearsed in big brother's explosion (although he must have thought these words inside his head a thousand times). He lets it all hang out. The dutiful son, the loyal son, the obedient son finally loses it! He has been quite and respectful. He has been good. He has followed orders. He has been faithful. He has done everything right – as opposed to everything wrong.

And dad takes it all in. He has no angry response. He has no

lecture about honoring your father. He has lost his younger son to a life of waste and recklessness. Now he is watching his older son unravel before his eyes and is seeing him becoming lost to anger and self-righteousness. The father's response is to simply love his oldest son in return. He says, "Son, you are always with me. Everything I have is yours . . . but your brother (not 'my son') was dead and is alive, he was lost and has been found."

A Father's embracing love is experienced by both sons in this story. Each one returns to his father – one from a distant land having fallen on his face and the other from a nearby field having yielded to envy and anger. Each one is loved unconditionally by his father.

Everyone of us can relate to this story from one perspective or another. Most of us have wandered somehow and some way in our lives. Each of us has squandered something of the unconditional love we have received. Whether through recklessness or self-righteousness; waywardness or anger, many of us have too often left the places of our lives in which we have known love and we have spent some time in the wilderness. When we have returned to the embrace of God's amazing grace, we know in our hearts, we have come home.

Some of us have experienced being cast away from home. We have found ourselves on the outside looking in or walking away with our back to the place of rejection, swearing we will not turn around and look again. When we have been told, "Leave and don't come back until you see things my way?" OR "Don't come back until you deny who you are and have changed your very nature," OR "Don't come back until you have made something of yourself!" how do we find home in such a broken estate?

Coming home to a place where no one waits with open arms, no one seeks to love and reconcile broken relationships and no one seems to care – coming home to this doesn't seem worth the journey. And so we wander in search of home – by the grace of God, and following our hearts, we trust that we will know what home feels like when we arrive. Home is the place where you find

God - the place where grace is spoken and felt. I often say on Sunday mornings, "If you are seeking a church home, we hope you consider First Church. But even it is only for today, we hope you feel welcome in our community of faith." Home is where you know and you feel the love of God. I pray that you find the father's welcome and the grace of God here. I pray that you are home at last.

In the beginning, I called this a parable about a prodigal father. The word prodigal means, "recklessly extravagant" or "giving profusely or lavishly." The father's love in this story is just that – it is extravagant and profuse love lavished on both sons.

While we all relate in some way or another to the sons in this story, their inner and outer waywardness, their struggles, their brokenness, it is so much harder to step into the sandals of the lavishly loving father. We struggle much of the time to be the father in this story. We struggle to welcome the wayward ones home. We struggle to show the homeward one our loving way. Perhaps we have so many homeless people in our society because we have failed to feel and share the unconditional love of God.

Can we say, "The father is like me"? Are we even interested in being like the father, or are we only hoping that someone else is like the father to us? Let us remember that of all the things Jesus said, perhaps the most radical of all was, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." In other words, "Set your inner compass on mercy and tender love as your God has done for you."

It begins with an offer and a presence – a cup of water, a kind word, a loving smile. Especially on this, the eighth anniversary of the war in Iraq, it may lead to a "Thank you" and an embrace for a man or woman who has given time and service to our country in times of war. It may lead to shelter for the immigrants and refugees or for a homeless man, woman or child. It may be a hug for your child or neighbor who has lost his or her inner-compass and needs to come home again.

Please believe me when I say, our children need our love way

more than they need our judgment. Run to them when they, broken, find their way home. Listen to them, when they, angry, find their voice to speak. It will be your compassion that will transform their lives in the greatest way.

Whatever it may be in your life, it is time to reconcile broken relationships – with siblings, with parents, with those whom you have a broken relationship. It is time to run to those who are reckless and self-righteous and throw your arms around them and seek to heal the hurts of this world. Now is the time. Because when all is said and done, our exciting faith is all about embracing love. Amen.

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