

A sermon preached by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 1, February 10, 2008, dedicated to my mother and father, who brought me into this world 50 years ago yesterday, to my older sister Deb and older brother Paul, who loved me and grew with me as family and always to the glory of God!

***How Do I Live My Faith in My Family?***

***Luke 15:11-32***

***Part II of VIII in the Lenten sermon series:***

***“Questions My Father Asked Me”***

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

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Do you know this story? We assume we know it. But, stories we believe we know and love are often left unprodded, unchallenged, and uninteresting. Let’s take another look . . .

This story is about a father and his two sons. The older son knows how the world works. He is a classic oldest child -- begins life with rookie parents who make rookie mistakes. As an oldest son, he has to push against the limits. He has to learn how to work and grow up much faster. He is dutiful, hardworking and loyal to his father. We think we know him.

The younger brother knows how to work the world. He, like other younger children, inherits parents who are veterans. Like veterans they are parents somewhat tired by the work of parenting. These old-timers have relaxed quite a bit. The youngest 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 who will learn to walk, read and of course, push parental buttons. Younger children learn to play their parents like a fiddle. And they are good at it. In this story, the younger son is a master fiddler (Richard Swanson in *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2006, pp. 128-130).

The master fiddler is hard at work in this story as he goes to his father and convinces him that it is a good idea that they pretend together that the father was dead so that the son could fictively inherit his share of the property. Face it! 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.

It isn’t long before the younger son has blown all his inheritance on wild adventures in a far away land. It says, “*he came to himself.*” In other words, he figures out the bottom line of hitting bottom! There is a lot the text doesn’t say. It doesn’t say he repents of wasting his father’s lifetime of work on “easy street.” It doesn’t say he confesses his sin. It doesn’t say he goes to a church or synagogue and finds religion. It doesn’t say he says a little prayer to God for the bad things he has done. It doesn’t say he turns his life over to God or turns around in any way.

All it says is he recognizes he is hungry, out of cash and perhaps most humiliating for a Jew, he is feeding pigs. And the swine are eating better than he is. As he comes to himself, 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 son’s speech has been muttering under his breath the whole way home.

But the son begins to speak and only half of what he wants to say gets out of his mouth before his father, who has seen him from a distance and runs to meet him, declares in a totally unrehearsed way: *“Quick! Dress him with a robe, a ring for his finger and sandals. Get the fattened calf and kill it and we will have a celebration feast because my lost son who was dead has come back to life! He was lost and is found!”*

But, before we get too excited about the party, let’s remember the father has an older son, too. The older son comes home from yet another hard day’s work and hears the music playing and smells the unfamiliar, but glorious smell of beef cooking, and he asks one of the slaves what is going on. *“Your brother has come home, so your dad is throwing a party!”* Big brother shares no delight in the return of little brother. His brain fills with visions, too. All he can see, and smell, and hear is a future of a smaller estate, harder work, sale of more of his future inheritance for a drunken fool of a little brother. He sees his brother now living off 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 fathers’ 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 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 getting lost to anger and self-righteousness. The father simply loves his oldest son in return. He says, “son, *you are always with me. Everything I have is yours . . . but **your brother** was dead and is alive, he was lost and has been found.*”

Do we really know this story? This is only one of three parables that Jesus tells about finding what is lost in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. But, it is the one that sticks to our ribs and embeds itself in our consciousness. **What does this story tell us about living faith in our family?**

First, in every family, family dynamics are at work. Like a kaleidoscope, the view of every family changes from the angles, the twists in time, the light and the overall perspective of each person who looks through the glass. Each parent sees things one way. Each child sees things another way. Depending on the gender and birth order, plus any number of factors in the life of each child, their relationship to each parent and the total family system, each child looks through the kaleidoscopic tube and sees things differently.

Each has a concern for themselves and their location in the family system. There is never a pure motivation for anyone in any family system. We call it sibling rivalry, but it is the interaction and movement between siblings to achieve attention and receive love. While one brother or sister may be affectionate and outgoing, another may be secluded and yet equally affectionate in a quiet way. The jockeying we often see for parental and other sibling attention is called “rivalry.” But, we could call it “reality.” Reality over rivalry -

because each person in the system is ever growing into their own personhood and relationship not only to one another, but to a Higher Power.

This is where faith enters the equation of family. I have witnessed the miracle of grace and forgiveness akin to the amazing grace of the father in this family, which enters in through the power of unconditional love. God enters each person and the whole family systems sometimes in remarkable and demonstrable ways, but just as often in subtle and seemingly unremarkable ways. I have seen the reunion of family as it gathers and feels the warm smile of God upon broken relationships. I also have witnessed a hand touching, a gentle embrace reuniting or a smile connecting one broken and separation brethren with another. God's grace and forgiveness can literally turn a family around and heal those who have been torn asunder.

In *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Henri M. Nouwen reflects on Rembrandt's painting by the same name. As the prodigal son kneels before his father, the father places both hands on his sons back. Nouwen points out that the left hand is firm on this back - with energy and strength coming from the thumb and fingers. Conversely, the right hand is laid on the back with a gentle, light touch. Strength and gentleness from two hands of the father to the son. So much of God's love is communicated in the hands of the father. Faith is lived in our families by the gentle and strong hold we have on those we love and those held in the embrace of God.

When faced with difficult times in our marital and partnered relationships, I tell couples that no less than the power of God in prayer will see them through. So often we get wrapped-up in our

own issues and our own guilt and personal trauma that we miss the gentle and strong hand of God upon us. We lose touch and we lose perspective. It is then that God enters in.

God enters into our families when we pray together, worship together and serve together. As we work together and express and experience faith in our families, we grow closer to God. Forgiveness and grace is best and most intimately experienced in family. Working through our struggles and challenges can be a faithful family exercise as well. Our flaws and our foibles, our ability to look at ourselves and laugh at ourselves, can be wonderfully lived out in family.

But, ultimately, I believe we live out our faith in our families by “Coming home” - coming home to God and to one another. In essence, it is all about coming home. In our story today, each son 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 son wanders far and each one finds his way home.

We, too, need to come home. Somehow, someday, each of us has squandered something of the unconditional love we have received. Whether through recklessness or self-righteousness; waywardness or anger, we too have often left the places of our lives in which we have known love and we too have lost our way in the wilderness - either the wilderness of distant lands or the wilderness of separation from God. When we return to the embrace of God’s amazing grace, we know in our hearts that we have come home.

Some of us have had wholly different separations. Some of us have been cast away from home. We have been told: *“leave and don’t come back until . . . you have changed your very nature . . . your*

*sexual orientation . . . or . . . until you have seen things my way . . . you have made something of yourself.*” How do we find home in such a broken vessel as all of this? 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.

But, home is ultimately where your heart is. It is where you find God. 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.”* Perhaps, in your search for home, we can be the place you call home and experience God's unconditional love.

Each one of us struggles at times to be the father in this story. We struggle to welcome the wayward one home. Perhaps we have so many homeless people in our society because we failed to feel and share the unconditional love of God.

It may be with a cup of water or coffee. It may be with a kind word and loving smile. It may be with an embrace of God's grace. It may be with a “thank you” for the love and service some man or woman has given to this country in times of war. It may be with shelter for a refugee or a homeless man, woman or child.

Whatever it may be, it is time to reconcile broken relationships with siblings and parents. It is time to run to those who are reckless and self-righteous and those who are angry and resentful and to throw your arms around them and seek to heal the hurts of their world. It is time. Because after all is said and done, life (and yes, eternal life as well), is all about coming home. Amen.