

Sunday March 30, 2025

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Meditation: “The Prodigal”

When my father died almost a decade ago, it took almost 3 years before the estate was finally settled. The remains of his assets, after all of his debts and final expenses were covered, was split equally 8 ways between myself, my three siblings, my three step-siblings, and our half-sister. All of this came to mind as I sat down to read the scripture lesson for today. I realized, in Biblical times, my father’s remaining assets would have been split three ways, not eight, between myself, my brother, and my step-brother. And I, being the eldest, would have received a double share, half of the estate, with my brother and step-brother each splitting the rest. I don’t even want to think about the pain or the problems such a division would cause. Why should I get twice what the other two sons get? Why should it only be the males who inherit, and not the females as well? The pain. The bickering. The envy. The... The one thing I do know is that, even though I held my father in low esteem, for a number of reasons, there is no way I would ever have dreamed of asking for an inheritance while dad was still alive. Nor did I expect one upon his death, quite frankly.

How many here have heard the story of the Prodigal Son before? And I’m sure if you’ve heard it once, you’ve heard it 100 times that the sinners of this world are the prodigal son, turning their backs on the father; and that God is the father, waiting for them to come to their senses, ready to forgive and welcome them home; and that we in the church are the older brother, who remained faithful to the father. But, I wondered, is that all that the story is about? Just what, exactly does prodigal mean? I started by looking it up. It means: recklessly extravagant, or one who spends foolishly.

Certainly the younger son, the one who said to his father, “you are as good as dead to me, give me my due,” and then when he had received it he left.... Certainly he spent his inheritance foolishly on, what shall we say, wine,

women, and song. Certainly he was prodigal. And when the money and the partying came to an end, and he needed to eat, he wound up feeding swine, for a man who was clearly not a Jew. In essence, he sold himself into slavery to a foreigner, to feed animals that the Jews considered unclean, so he could eat, and it sounds like there wasn't much food there for him as he looked with envy on what the swine were fed. He was worth less than the swine he attended, at least in the eyes of his keeper. And then he remembered what a generous and gracious man his father had always been and decided to seek out his father's mercy, if not his forgiveness.

The younger son clearly understood the father's heart, for when the father saw his son coming he did not wait for him to arrive and throw himself at his father's feet to beg for mercy and forgiveness, no, he made a public spectacle of himself, hiking up his robe, running pell mell down the road to embrace his long departed son, to lavish upon him the best robe, a ring, a feast. In that moment, the father reveals himself as extravagant, perhaps even recklessly so. The father, in a sense, is also prodigal?

The son has washed up, the feast has been prepared, the celebration is on in full swing when the older brother, who has been out working the farm, hears the party. He gets closer and finds out the party is at his father's house. He gets closer still, and discovers that the party is being thrown in honour of his brother, the one who said all those hurtful things to their father, took his inheritance, fled, sinned mightily, and has now come slinking home like a rat. The older brother will not join the celebration. He will not humour his father's wishes. He will not be consoled. He is judgemental, hard hearted, mean spirited, perhaps a little envious of the 'fun' his little brother enjoyed, at least temporarily, and certainly envious of the party thrown now in his honour, the undeserving rat. He has lived his life with the father and failed to understand the father's mercy, forgiveness, and joy in his sons. The older brother has spent his life foolishly without learning the lessons of mercy and forgiveness

and to celebrate good news. Perhaps the older brother is the real prodigal in the story.

Who are you in the story? Perhaps there have been times where you have been more than just one of the characters.

Who is Dorchester United Church in the story? How can we show Dorchester and the world how to be merciful, extravagant and joyous?

My prayer is that each of you, and all of us together can show this community and the world how to be prodigal with mercy, with love, with our assets, with our time, with our charity, with our striving for justice, and with joy. May it be so. Amen.