

“Until”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
March 29, 2020

Luke 15:11-24

¹¹ Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. ¹³ Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

¹⁴ “When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. ²¹ Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! ²³ Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

A week and a half ago I discovered that when I upgraded my laptop to Windows 10, Solitaire was reinstalled. Not a good thing usually, but at the end of a full week with the added complication of coronavirus, Free Cell was just the thing. For two hours, I did not think about the world situation or what this would mean for all of us.

Since then, however, I have spent too many hours playing one game or another, trying, I suppose, to dull the anxiety.

Jesus’ story of the son who goes his own way speaks to me.

When we were young, we heard this as a story of a young man. Later, we connected with the older sibling who wonders, “Where is my party?!” Sometimes we hear it as a story about God, longing for us to come home.

Today, I invite you again to connect with the son who takes what he is given and does what he feels like with it, using up his gifts and his resources, until when famine hits, he is penniless and must resort to day labor at a farm.

That could be me when I mindlessly play Woody 99 or Pipe Art. It could be my sister and her family when they watch too much TV. Or any of us when we eat or drink or do anything too much to try to numb the fear or the boredom. “But,” we say, “What else is there to do?”

God, the parent in this story, lets the prodigal ones head off on our own, with all our resources. The young man in Jesus’ story has had a good upbringing. He knows what is important to his father. He has been raised to understand the value of work and the

importance of doing what is right. Still, he goes ahead and wastes his money, his time and energy on things that will never matter. And, in the end, he has nothing to show for his spent inheritance or his time away.

The father knows ahead of time that this son will squander everything. Yet out of love and patience, he gives the boy what he asks for. God knows we will sometimes waste our resources – our time, our money, our health, our energy – yet God patiently waits for us to come to our senses. And that is our theme for today.

Walter Brueggemann, OT scholar, suggests that the story of the prodigal son is Jesus' commentary on Psalm 73.¹ Listen to these verses:

If I had said, "I will talk about all this,"
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.
But when I tried to understand these things,
it just seemed like hard work
Until I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood what would happen... (15-17)

The prodigal shows us "before" and "after" pictures. The "before" is when he takes his inheritance and runs. It's fun for a while but then turns sour as he loses everything and ends up herding pigs.

Only then, as he thinks about his situation, do we witness the "after" picture. The whole story turns on one phrase: "When he came to himself..." Until he comes to himself, he is simply a foolish, solitary person. But when he comes to himself, he comes into his true identity. He comes to himself as a beloved child of the father. He comes to his senses and recognizes that his father is the only one he wants to be with.

Once, he comes to himself, he no longer cares what happens to him. He will go home. He will throw himself on his father's mercy, not to keep from starving but because there is no place on earth better than next to his father. He does not care that the farm now belongs to his brother. The only "portion" he want is his father.

The prodigal's act of "coming to himself" is grounded in his father's love. This love gives him the courage to let go of his false identity and finally to become who he truly is. Only after accepting this love and finding the courage that comes with it, is he is ready to embrace being his father's son.

What does this mean for our lives?

Even before the coming of this novel coronavirus, we have often felt like there were no possibilities. How could we effect change for a better world? For better lives? We had grown unsure about old certainties. We no longer trusted institutions that we used to believe in. Full of fear, people had become more comfortable with conflict, more strident in voicing their views, less willing to consider other perspectives or to compromise, more despairing. We wondered, "Where is the alternative?"

Now, we are instructed to stay put (and it is safer for all this way) and it would be so easy to give in to anger or apathy or fear. And yet, God is active, even now, working all things for the good. And God is inviting us to practice hope for a better future.

For God knows that it is in times of crisis that people have the best chance to grow into our true selves. We can choose to let this time of uncertainty change us for the better. We can invite God to mold and shape us so that when we can again gather, we do so with joy, knowing who we are, knowing our purpose.

Who are we? We are Easter people, living through a long Friday. We are God's beloved community, being safer-at-home out of love for all the rest. We are followers of Christ, living out his compassion and justice, letting God draw us ever closer.

And our purpose? To live together, in communion, with all God's world. Having been reminded that we are all one common worldwide community, we need to care for each other as sisters, brothers and friends. We will work at home and farther afield at inviting people into hope as we care for their well-being. We will encourage people to open their hearts and minds and to accept and welcome the things that make us different as well as sharing what we have in common.

All of humanity shares an amazing 99.9% of DNA. Only 1/1000th of our genetic makeup is different. When we get to the other side of this coronavirus scare, and we will, let's remember this.

And let's live our purpose of working together with all of God's people to bring forth God's kingdom, right here and now, for all of creation.

Would you pray with me?

Bring us to our senses, O God. Turn our hearts away from the path of deathliness and toward life, and toward you. Turn us, to live in joy in your presence all of our days. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*, "Until," Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 66-67.