

**SERMON**  
**“Embraced By Love”**  
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**March 14, 2010**  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

2 Corinthians 5: 16-24

**Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow **welcomes sinners and eats with them.**

So he told them this parable:

“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!’”

“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 you 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 kill 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.’”

## SERMON

Parables were the powerful story style of Jesus. When the stories Jesus told do their work on us, we begin to understand God, ourselves, and each other more richly. The one before us today may well be Jesus at his best. Yet, the story is oh so familiar that it may well feel like a comfortable blanket that can lull you to sleep. So I invite to listen anew. Try to wipe your brain clean of all you have been told or assumed on your own about this dramatic, bowl you over story.

Each time we hear a parable, we are invited to step into the story from a new angle. Jesus’ parables are meant to be sneaky. They are meant to sneak up on our blind side to surprise us and show us things we have never noticed before. They will not let you stay in that come to church to have what you already believe affirmed. I warn you, they will stretch you beyond where you are now.

Clarence Jordan, author of the *Cotton Patch Gospels*, said a parable is like a Trojan horse; it looks harmless, you let it in, and then – Bam! It has you. It’s got you in the movement, in the heartbreak, in the labor of reconciliation, in the welcoming home of the lost. It’s got you at the party where you can no longer miss the kingdom, God’s kingdom on earth.

It all starts with some dim recognition that clicks. Oh yes. I remember leaving home with the allure of grand adventures in mind after my home town pastor explained that women do not become ministers. What a relief! I was free from thinking **I had to do something for God**.

My imagination ran wild with dreams of becoming a great fashion designer. I loved to sew. I loved to draw. Certainly I was meant to be a fashion designer. It fit so neatly with my talents and interests. Ministry clearly didn't. I was no writer or public speaker. My worst grades were in English. What had I been thinking? Where had those thoughts come from anyway?

I, Becky Hebert, would become a world renowned fashion designer. After graduation I would get a job in New York and make a name for myself there. From there it would be Paris, France. Off into the far country I went, and my time there lasted longer than that of the prodigal's.

Shakespeare captures this wanderlust in *Taming of the Shrew*. "Such wind as scatters young men (and young women) through the world, to seek their fortunes further than at home where small experience grows."

**In all my wanderings, there has always been a longing for something forgotten for which I have a hankering deep inside someplace.** Am I the wondering child of the story who has never found her way back home completely? There is some sort of disconnect within my soul.

Not you! Not to worry! There is something for everyone within a parable. In the land of the Ozarks where people don't journey far from home and the security of family, there must be many who get a dim recognition that clicks with the son who stayed home—the son who cherishes family more than adventure. We could all do with a real hard look at verse 11 of this story. "So he, the father, divided his property between them." He did not just give the younger son his half and keep the rest. No. He justly divided his property between the two of them. And so you see, the fatted calf, the best robe, the ring, and the sandals all actually belonged to the elder son, the faithful son. These were things for which he had worked hard. He deserved them.

He had earned them. How dare the father take what was rightfully his and give it to “this brother of his” who had devoured his inheritance?

Often I have heard that the issue in this parable is about desire running amok. The youngest son ending up in a pig sty with pigs—the animal with a ferocious appetite for, well, for any and every thing. We live in a time when appetites have gone haywire. Advertisers say to us, “You are a bundle of appetites, let us help you get the satisfaction you deserve.” Mick Jagger sings for us, “I can’t get no satisfaction . . . I tried, and I tried, and I tried. . .” So much out there to titillate us, but nothing really satisfies. Even for the elder son there is the hording appetite, of wanting to keep it all for himself. How dare you ask me to share that for which I’ve work hard with those who don’t have any better sense than to throw it away on booze and women? Is this what’s at the heart of this story? The demon’s greed?

Yes. It is there...but this story has it all. From the first lesson of Lent; *temptation*, to the second lesson; *repentance*, to the third lesson; *lamentations over which could have been*—but, at the heart of the story...is the father’s love.

The turning toward home that goes on here gives a whole new meaning to repentance. Remember, *repentance*, the first lesson of Lent, means to turn away from that which tempts you **to mature in your faith**. We have all heard of how the boy repented, meaning, he had some profound religious experience in the pig sty. But no. He turns to go home simply because...he is hungry. He thinks only of himself. In fact he hatches a rather distrustful plan to use his father again. The “turning part” of repentance is not complete until we grow up a little. If there is any real transformation in the boy, it comes not in the pig sty but when he finds himself surprisingly, swept off his feet by...his father’s love.

George Balanchine, the Russian born ballet choreographer, got it wrong in his ballet in 1929, with the son groveling at the father's feet. No. There was no way for the son to make it to his knees, for Jesus says the father...“ran.” These days, running is regarded as the “in” thing. To get up early and jog before you even dress for work makes you truly conscientious about your health. We run to the store, school, home, work. You name it. Rushing everywhere makes up the hard-working back bone of America. In Jesus' day, men just didn't run; to run was a sure sign you had lost all dignity. But this father, who let himself be taken advantage of, cares more for the boy than for his own dignity. He could have given the boy a thrashing, required heavy penance...sackcloth...fasting...ashes. But instead...he *ran*.

And the son's world turned.

It is for this love that some journey in search of fame, and some of us stay home hoping to be the favorite. It is THE disconnect in all our souls driving us. There only seems to be moments in this life when, for a second or two, the connect happens...and we know love in its purest form. But in that second...the world shifts.

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, when ever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility that will accept a convert [on any] terms. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men,” C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.

In God's overwhelming compulsion to love us, no matter what is our liberation, we often we get it in our heads that we need to sever our ties with family in order to be liberated. No, this

story says—real liberation from the temptations to which we have become slaves, real freedom to transcend and grow up, comes when we are touched deeply by sacred love.

Even then, we are forever the wandering child, struggling to find our way back home...one love step at a time. We will, for the rest of our lives, work to break ties with family traditions that hold us captive to ways-of-being, and thinking, that blind us to the ways of God. The disconnect within our soul is the hunger that fuels our desire to keep on trying to let go of our security blankets, to soar in uncharted territory—free to let our souls sing and be undone by the beauty of a God...who *runs*.