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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

March 14, 2010

Luke 15:11-32

Christianity Is Not Fair, Thank God!

It is one of the greatest little stories ever told, commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It has been analyzed endlessly by scholars and school children alike and still all the different insights to be gained from it may not yet have been uncovered. Layer upon layer of meanings have been gleaned from the Parable of the Prodigal Son about some of the most important lessons in life.

If it were not for the writer of the gospel of Luke we would not have this Parable. None of the other three gospels include it but it does reflect a continuing theme of Luke. Throughout his narrative, Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion and desire to include in the circle of his friendship the lost, the broken, and the self-destructed. The Parable of the Prodigal Son may be Jesus' best explanation as to why he considered his friendship circle to be so wide.

In order to learn what we might from the parable it may be helpful to examine the personal qualities of the three main characters: the younger son, the older son, and the father.

What was the younger son like? Well, for one thing, he would seem to have been somewhat impatient; he wanted what he wanted and he wanted it right away. He also seems to have been a know-it-all type of fellow who thought that he understood the world and would be able to protect himself from its treachery. Apparently he believed that he could flirt with its temptations and even indulge in one or two now and then and remain unscathed by them. Would it be reasonable to assume that he did not think he would ever fall into addiction, or disease, or poverty? Likely he thought he was smarter than that. At least at this early stage of his life he needed to learn the hard way.

After he had wasted all his inherited money and found himself on the verge of starvation he realized how naïve he had been. He had hit bottom, a Jew making his living feeding pigs and yet still not able to get enough to eat himself. He realized he had only one chance left, and that was forgiveness. After what he had done he could lay no claim to his father's or brother's affection. If they did not allow him to come back home to live, although he did not deserve even to be allowed back in the door, the recovery of his life

would be hopeless. That realization might have been one of the first times he really knew something.

Now what was the older son like? The older son was a loyal person. He was a good boy. He did what his father said. We might think of him as the type who played by the rules. He may not have had the trouble some other people did, certainly not like his brother did, because the older son lived what we might call a responsible life. He worked with his father during the day and may well have stayed home in the evening. If he were living among us today the police would never need to come to his house in the middle of the night. He would never lose his driver's license to a DUI. He would never need to pay lawyers to get him through bankruptcy or foreclosure or divorce or to keep him out of jail. He would never get AIDS or an STD. He would never cost society much money except to draw on Social Security for forty years because he would live so long.

But the older son also showed himself to be self-righteous and judgmental and with a heart like a stone. And he was as conceited and self-centered as his younger brother.

The father, on the other hand, was profoundly different from both the sons. The defining characteristic of the father's life was unconditional love. Love was what motivated him, love was what energized him, love was what guided him. Love also made him playful, joyful, and just what the younger son needed upon his return home. Love made the father not fair because love made the father forgiving.

And of the two sons and the father, which one are we?

I think at our worst we are like both the younger son and the older son. We are like the younger son when we squander our inheritance of faith and prosperity in this free land. When we think of it, how few of us born in the USA have sufficient reason to be anything less than successful in every way? Yet we are all imperfect and like the younger son, in our different ways, we have wasted opportunities and waste some still. And thus like the younger son, if we are courageous and honest enough to face it, we all have no other chance at life and love but to be accepted and forgiven in spite of ourselves.

Perhaps the most important way we are like the older son is in our resistance to the idea that we are at all like the younger son. But also like the older son, we are often the responsible ones. We do our duty. We work our forty hours each week, pay our taxes, and we are the ones here in church. We support the church with our dollars and find a way to squeeze out even more of our resources when the roof on the Meeting House needs to be replaced. But we can be heard to sigh about it, and we can be heard to complain that it is always the same people that do everything. We can be caught sometimes working in the church under duress, only doing it because we think no one else will. Do we often enough take part in church life and work because it gives us

pleasure to do so? Perhaps to some degree we even participate in the church because somewhere in the back of our minds is the idea that God will be displeased with us if we do not. Are we in this way like the older son in the parable who always did what his father wanted but was not happy about doing it?

The character in the story we would do well most to resemble is the father. Like the father, let's have fun living. Let's have fun being the church. If in general we are not having fun being the church, than we are not doing it right, and that may be an indication that we really are not being the church at all. Many ways have been suggested as to how to measure the health of a congregation: new members, growing budgets, support for missions to others we do not know of at least ten per cent of local church income, the level of children and youth participation with some of them entering full time Christian vocations as adults— all of those ways of measuring the health of a congregation surely have some merit. But I wonder if there is another and even better way to measure the health of a congregation, the same way we use to measure the health of the relationship of the oldest son to his father and brother, by asking some questions. How much complaining is there in the congregation? How much jealousy? How much jockeying for credit? How much resentment and feeling unappreciated? In other words, how much fun is the congregation having being the church? I think the average Christian as well as the average church needs to be more like the father and have fewer rules and more love, and a lot more fun.

I have read comments by others that they think the parable should be renamed: *The parable of the Older Son*, or *The Parable of the Two Sons*, or *The Parable of the Father*.

But maybe it would be best not to put anything at all about the brothers or their father in the title. Maybe we should simply call it the story of you, and me, and God.