

The theme for this service is the story of the Prodigal Son. This is a story that always stirs interesting discussion. I am going to try to explore some of these themes for you in the next few minutes.

Let's start with the word "prodigal" -- prodigal is defined as "wastefully extravagant". If there's any word that seems to have a place in this day and age, doesn't this seem appropriate? Consider the excesses of Wall Street. Consider all the talk of the wealthiest 1% of our country?

In the story, the youngest son requests his inheritance from his father. Then he goes forth into a period of "foolish living". He exhausts all the money he receives from his father. When I reflect on this part of the story, I think about the values exhorted in pop culture: valuing shallow popularity over genuine leadership and character. Such a message is so detrimental to our culture. Such a message is alluring and seductive, especially to young people. We are told that good looks and money can take the place of hard work and sacrifice. The youngest son, in his youth and inexperience is taken in by this lie, and he lives beyond his means into poverty.

I think it's interesting that the prodigal son is the younger son. It makes me think of the arrogance that I know I had in my late teens and early twenties. I recall having such a sharp mind, health and strength. I was confident about my decisions, no matter how poorly thought out they actually were. I remember interviewing for my first job at The Hartford when I was asked "What are your weaknesses?". My response: "I have no weaknesses." At the time, I truly believed those words.

I can almost see the desperate look on the young son as he pushes his superficial life to the limit of his money, just to be met with the pain and emptiness of a morning hangover; abandoned by his fair weather friends, without a home and without any means. I can imagine a chilling morning dawn greeting him with the bitter reality that all the wealth of the world can't fill the needs of the soul. The thing that he seeks through the material, superficial world, evades his grasp.

We are an imperfect people in an imperfect world, and this basic lesson of the limits of money and happiness is one that we all learn at some point. It is a

universal human truth that resonates with us as we hear this story. It is the truth that money is a tool, but not the driver for our happiness.

Now the young son hits rock bottom. And coincidentally, it is a time of a great famine, which I think strengthens the story. It's as though the actions of the young son not only exhausted his own money, but has stripped the land itself of its bounty. He hires himself out to a citizen who sends him to the fields to feed pods to pigs. How very desperate and pathetic.

And yet, at that point in the young son's story, a great lesson of humility is deeply learned. It's so often that the lessons we learn the best, are the ones that are learned through suffering. And we hear his suffering as he wishes he could eat the pods he's feeding the pigs. He openly proclaims that he is dying of hunger. I would say at that moment, when we are at our lowest, is probably when we are closest to God. It's when we are not clouded by the abstractions of this world, and we can appreciate those things that matter the most. When the young son returns to his father and he declares his sin against his family and heaven, and asks for the lowest place among his father's workers, we are witnessing a man who has been humbled by the corrective actions of God, nature and economics.

Now this is the part of the story that gets a little dicey for many of us who have younger siblings. The father accepts the younger son with open arms and orders a banquet in the younger son's honor. And besides that, the father doesn't even tell the older son about the banquet – the older son is still toiling in the fields while they're off killing the fatted calf. How unfair is that? Before we look at the story through the God lens, let's think about the father's perspective: could it be that the father saw in the son's contrition, his genuine growth? Perhaps he was so moved by the change in his arrogant, pleasure seeking son that he just had to celebrate right at that moment. There was no time to send out invitations. It was a significant moment for celebration. Perhaps this change in the younger son required a significant and positive response. This is really just my conjecture. I can say that I've seen some of my Sunday School students over the years react to this story, with hostility, especially those who have younger siblings. From that perspective, this story feels unjust.

But now let's now take a look through God's lens. I think the point to Jesus' story was to help us see that the love of God is so great that there is nothing we can do to lose it. No matter what level of wasteful, immoral living we choose, we will always be accepted back into the loving arms of our loving God. This is the good news, and this is what we believe. This is a fundamental tenet of our Christian beliefs. This is the contrast between God's law and man's law.

So, what can we as Christians take from this story?

For starters I would say that we live in a culture in which the safety net for those in need is always under attack. It is constantly under fire from those who quite frankly, have plenty. Oftentimes our policymakers seem to be operating under an assumption that those in need should buck up and work harder. I'm not saying that our social systems aren't being taken advantage of – I'm sure they are, but that shouldn't give us reason to dismantle the protections from under the feet of those who need them. If we can't ensure the health and safety of those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, what hope is there of the rest of us?

Obviously public policy is outside our daily circle of influence, so how can we as Christians respond to this story in our day to day lives here in First Congregational Church, East Hartford? Well, I would encourage all of you to get involved with our many opportunities for serving those in need. Specifically, the Food Bank, the Church Garden, walking or supporting a walker in the CROP Walk, supporting or volunteering with the youth Work Camp, or other mission work that hear about through our Board of Missions.

Through mission work you do in our community, you may be looking into the eyes of a Prodigal Son who has hit rock bottom and is approaching that deep understanding of God that will enrich him and our community.

Blessed be the word of God.

Amen.