

It's so good to be with you all today. To see faces I haven't seen in a while. To have the choir back singing beautiful anthems. To see the 8 o'clockers introducing themselves to the 10 o'clockers, and to have the children and youth moving around the sanctuary in force. It's just great to be together.

But it's also hard to believe it's September. The summer absolutely flew by. From directing a summer camp, to seeing family I hadn't seen in 10 years, and hosting family and introducing them to Southern New England, it's been a whirlwind for me. I hope it's been good for you, too.

For those of you who have been spending Sunday mornings on the golf course or traveling, let me catch you up. Over the last several weeks of the summer, I focused on Abraham and his dysfunctional family. We got up in their business, learned some embarrassing things, and criticized our spiritual ancestors.

And I promised last week that we'd wrap that series up and return to the Good News of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, and we are, but I didn't promise you that we'd stop talking about dysfunctional families. In fact, today we get a story that's known around the world for its awkward family dynamics.

So, hear now these words from Luke chapter 15.

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am

dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.’ <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> 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.’”

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Friends, I think you know the answer to this question. What is the name of this story? . . . The Prodigal Son! Right! The title suggests that the story is all about the younger son. The details in the story are mostly about the younger son's misadventures and his inner monologue when he decides to return home. Prodigal literally means wasteful, extravagant spender.

But I think this story is badly titled. Jesus did not call this story "The Prodigal Son," that was done in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by a man known as Saint Jerome who translated the original Greek into Latin.

No offense to Jerome, but I think he could have done better. There are three characters in this story, and each one has a voice and a decision to make about the relationship they have with the other two. I've heard some call this the Parable of the Two Sons – better, but it's still missing the critically impactful decisions the father made. Some call it the Parable of the Loving Father, which is nice but still doesn't capture the dynamics and lessons from the sons' perspectives. Some call the story The Unfairness of God's Love, which highlights the radical mercy of God, but calling it "unfair" is a negative way to look at it, I think. Unfairness sounds like a word the older son would use – pretty judgmental.

But I think that there's good reason for calling it so many different things. The story means different things to different people. And it means different things at different stages of our lives.

For half of my life, I grew up hearing this story being taught as though all of us in the pews were the younger son. We were the rebellious ones who demanded things of our loving God and then ran off and lived in sin and squandered our blessing. We were shameful and sinful. We were warned to repent, as the younger son did, head back in the direction of God, and humbly offer to be servants, not children, so long as we could be in the household of God again. That was one way to hear the story that focused on the younger son.

As I got older, I heard the story from a more encouraging perspective. We were still the younger son, sinful and repentant, but the good news was that God had been watching

out the window, waiting for us sinners to appear on the horizon. God, the Father, would shamelessly run to us, not something a grown man would normally do. But God would be so happy for us to humbly return that God would run to us and throw a party for us. We'd not be received as servants but as redeemed children. Fully restored into the family of faith. This version of the story focused on the loving mercy of God despite our rebelliousness.

But when I was a little older, I heard the story entirely differently. The majority of us who sit in hard-backed pews and put money in the offering plate and serve the church in the ways we are able are not like the younger son in the least. We are far more related to the older son. We are consistently saying yes to helping with the church activities. Yes, we'll provide fellowship snacks. Yes, we'll buy frozen vegetables for the WARM shelter dinner. Yes, we'll donate to the pancake dinner. Yes, we'll help with the bazaar.

We are constantly dependable. There are many of you who would drop everything and clear your schedule if I called and asked for your help. And within all of you who are so steadily reliable, there is a well-earned sense of pride. And deservedly so. This church would absolutely fall apart if it weren't for the dozens of you who always step up when needed and don't ask me to throw a party for you in return. You serve and you might feel like through your steady attendance and generosity and effort you've earned the Father's love and will receive your reward. Thanks would be appreciated. An occasional gift would be encouraging, but even without them, you trudge on reliably.

But what will you do when God embraces one whom you judge as sinful or reckless or irresponsible? What will you do when someone enters the household of God and the dynamics inside the house shift? When you don't feel appreciated? When you feel like you're clearly not the favorite because of how this rebellious one has been received? Somewhere along the way, I found myself resonating with the hypocrisy of the church (I mean, the older brother) and its snobby, self-righteous attitude.

So many churches today are like the elder son – working so hard to maintain the institution, but not us. Not Dunn's Corners Community Church!

We will not trudge through life thinking that we are earning God's grace through our work, steady though it may be! We will not do what we think is expected of us and then pitch a fit when God's grace is extended to those we judge unworthy! We will not refuse to celebrate the redemption of the lost! We will not break the Father's heart with our attitude of smug sanctimonious piety!

No! We must do better!

Throughout the centuries, people have identified as one of the brothers. When Jesus first spoke these words, the tax collectors were the younger brother and the pharisees were the older brother. Plain and simple, but since then, it has been studied by people the world over. Every continent, every language. No matter how you read it, this story is timeless. It is universal, and as some commentators have said, it truly stands on its own. You can read into it a lifetime of lessons. You can apply it in many ways. Stand in the shoes that fit you best. Empathize with the character that speaks to you.

All my life, I was told that I could step into the shoes of one of the characters. All my life, it was about seeing through one set of eyes, but this week, I feel like I'm ready for the next dimension. What I'm taking away from the parable this week is that I am called to rise above. I am called to be neither the self-aware, repentant younger son, nor the diligent but jaded older son. I am not even called to idly sit and just look out the window like the father, either.

I feel like I am not supposed to identify with one character anymore. Instead, I feel like I am supposed to embody all three parts of this family. I am called to humbly recognize that I have made demands of God and squandered God's mercy by making selfish choices like the younger son.

And, I am called to be consistently steady and responsible like the older son. Not because I feel that my actions will earn me God's love, but simply because I love God and I know God loves me. I want to be one that God can count on.

And, in light of today's theme of looking through the window, I feel called to look out the window like the Father and pray that my siblings who are out there suffering will come home and run toward them when they do. Embrace them before they have a chance to utter an apology and throw a party to welcome them back.

It's a big ask. I get it! To humbly repent, to work and to watch, to be known for our unwavering faithfulness to each other and this body, and to keep our eyes up, our gaze on the horizon, radically welcoming those who may not have any idea the sweat and effort it takes to run a church. To run toward the ones who are returning to the church and to pray for the return of those who are still out there.

But that is what we are called to do. To return to the father and work for the father and to watch with the father. To get up each day and put in effort and to join the party in the evening that is not for you but for someone else who has returned. That is the way it should be.

Following Jesus is not glamorous. It is not going to fill your bank account. It is not going to win you fame. Following Jesus is about taking up your own cross, selflessly loving our neighbors as ourselves, and giving all we have.

If there is a window in heaven, I pray that God looks through it and sees us, working joyfully, working steadily, and rhythmically pausing to look down the road, praying for restoration of love and family peace, ready to throw down our tools and run to meet the ones we thought we'd never see again.

There are lots of opportunities to serve the church here. Lots of ways to keep the building and programs functioning. We need new committee members on each and every committee. We need you to find a way to serve. And we need people to have their eyes on Post Road, Route 1, to be on the lookout for those who are searching for God. We need some people who are great at keeping things going internally and some people who have a heart for the hurting and still more who are gifted at welcoming others and throwing parties. It takes all of us, all of us, to do this right.

We're starting a new season of service, learning, growing, singing, bell ringing, cooking, sewing, building, fellowshiping, and loving here at DCCCP. Imagine what God will see when God peeks through the window and catch us at work and worship. It's going to be great. I can't wait, but it will take a team effort. Amen.