

# Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

March 6, 2016

## “Head of a Divided House”

“Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons ...’”

Luke 15:11

### Prelude

The fifteenth chapter of Luke is one of the more fascinating compositions in all of our New Testament literature.

We have three parables - which speak to a common theme. Two of the three parables are found only in Luke’s gospel.

The first parable speaks of sheep; 100 sheep; but one is lost. Jesus suggests the owner of the sheep will take leave of the 99 to seek the one that is lost; indeed, the search for one will continue - it won’t be suspended or halted - until the one is found.

And once found, will there not be rejoicing? Indeed, a party will be organized to celebrate, bringing together friends and neighbors to share the joy.

Luke closes with Jesus speaking:  
... **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance** (Luke 15:7).

We see here that parables are fluid, they require imagination, they invite interpretation. The sheep are important not because they are sheep - but for what they tell us about ourselves.

A second parable - a woman is in possession of 10 silver coins, but one is lost, misplaced. Does she not search, and sweep, and look high and low

until that one coin is found? And does she not call together **“friends and neighbors”** to rejoice, to share the joy?

Luke closes with Jesus speaking:  
**“there is joy in the presence of  
the angels of God  
over one sinner who repents.”**

And then the third parable,  
which is not so simply told,  
which is not so neatly wrapped.

It's a prolonged parable featuring  
different, complex, difficult characters:  
a father who defies all  
paternalistic stereotypes;  
two sons, an older, obedient, loyal and loveable son;  
but terribly self-righteous, and angry at the  
parent who fails to live up to his expectations;  
and a younger son, curious, overly eager,  
wanting so much to experience now  
the joys and pleasures and adventures  
that life has to offer;  
the younger son - loveable also,  
but impatient, impetuous, unmanageable,  
wanting to taste and see  
the world and its charms,  
and not the least bit loyal  
to the family.  
He can't wait to leave.

This is said to be one of the most famous  
of parables as told by Jesus.  
It is full of surprises, poking holes,  
upsetting a lot of our preconceived notions  
concerning life in this world that is  
so loved by God.

This is what parables do by design;  
they subvert the myths that give  
our lives meaning. They introduce  
novelty, alternative ways to conceive  
and understand our place in the world.

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Rembrandt (1606-1669),  
the grand master of the 17th century,  
was drawn to this parable again and again  
over the course of his life. He sketched and  
etched and painted the parable both early  
and late in his life. One of his last works,  
painted within two years of death,  
depicts the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1669) -  
a work described by art historian Kenneth Clark  
as **“a picture which those who have seen the original  
(in Leningrad) may be forgiven for claiming as  
the greatest picture ever painted.”**

Henri Nouwen was so mesmerized by Rembrandt's  
painting that he wrote about  
the painting, the painter, and the parable  
(*A Story of Homecoming*, 1992).

Nouwen was aware:  
both children needed forgiveness and healing;  
both needed to come home and experience  
the embrace of their forgiving father,  
but both are not so permitted in the parable.  
Nouwen concluded: **“it is clear that the hardest  
conversion to go through is the conversation  
of the one who stayed home.”** Which I take to mean:  
the most difficult conversions  
are for those who feel they have no need  
(much of this material can be found via  
Wikipedia, The Return of the Prodigal (Rembrandt)).

The poet, Edwin Arlington Robison,  
wrote a poem of the Prodigal Son,  
in which the younger speaks to the older,  
seeing him **“as indigent a stranger to surprise,  
I fear, as I was once, and as unwise.”**

**“You will thank God, some day, that I returned,”**  
so the younger hopes. But alas, that day in the poet's  
mind; it does not dawn in the parable Jesus tells.

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In working with this parable, I kept wondering about the audience, those for whom it was intended. It is quite a crowd Luke has drawn together to hear Jesus' teaching. Jesus was attracting "large crowds" (Luke 14:25). The attendance figures concerned him; I don't think he minded the quantity - but he was concerned about quality and commitment of following. Count the cost, Jesus counseled. Count the cost of being a disciple (see Luke 14:25, 28, 33).

In the setting of the 15th chapter, different crowds have converged:

- (1) there are tax collectors and sinners drawing near to listen;
- (2) there are Pharisees and scribes (religious types, establishment types, who typically keep a healthy distance from others they hope to avoid.

The Pharisees and scribes were not pleased with this integrated audience. They grumbled. Complained for having to co-mingle with their inferiors.

They went after Jesus for the company he kept:

He welcomes and receives and eats with an unworthy people.

That's what gave rise to the parables, Jesus speaking of people being obsessed with finding the lost, people rejoicing when those once dead rise and return to life worth living.

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Just a couple of comments on this.

An article was making the rounds this past week, seeking to explain the attraction of authoritarian leaders, who emerge when life is overwhelming and our lives are filled with uncertainty, and we experience social insecurity. To assuage our anxiety(ies), we look for leaders who are

**“simple ... powerful ... punitive.”**

The **“simple ... the powerful l... punitive ...**  
will do whatever it takes to keep order;  
to protect us from dangers that lurk  
in all that is foreign and different  
and unsettling.

I think we are not so gullible.  
But I hope we see in the prolonged parable,  
at least in part, a profound renunciation of a  
simple ... powerful ... punitive  
remedy  
for the family system Jesus puts  
smack dab in the center of his teaching.  
Jesus tells the parable to subvert the myth  
that simple ... powerful ... punitive demigods  
have the power to save us from ourselves.

This is what is surprising about the parable:  
it is not simple,  
the father renounces the use of power  
that would have been his to wield,  
save the power to forgive and be merciful;  
the father enforces no penalty or punishment,  
from either the derelict child who came to his senses,  
or the dutiful child offended by the father’s unfettered love,  
who scorned the father’s generosity; he saw the father  
as weak and foolish, and he was resentful,  
**“an indigent stranger to surprise.”**

The **“simple ... the powerful ... the punitive.”**  
Make no mistake, there is an allure for such  
solutions to our disordered lives.  
Churches cajole and malign gospel with  
such messaging.  
So also running for political office.  
This is what we were being offered by those  
on stage in the last (Detroit) presidential debate.  
Were we not all diminished by that spectacle?  
Were we not debased by what was raw and crude,  
the suggestion that genitalia is a relevant topic  
for determining fitness for office?

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Permit if you will my attempt to introduce some family system theory. I was in the early years of my ministry (1985) when Edwin Friedman published a book entitled *Generation to Generation - Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Friedman combined systems thinking with family therapy; he wanted clergy to consider working within three different families that are all emotionally tied and interconnected.

I have my family;  
we are each differently configured in families,  
whether one or in multiples;  
and together we are family.

Friedman's insight:  
unresolved issues in any one location can  
produce symptoms in others;  
and increased understandings in one can be  
beneficial and helpful to all three.

Friedman has contributed much to  
the field of leadership theory,  
and how leaders might best serve within  
congregations. He is the one who coined the term  
"**non-anxious presence**" as being a key characteristic  
of a change agent. Quoting from Friedman:

**"What is vital to changing any kind of family  
(and remember we are dealing with three families  
that are interlocked) is not knowledge of technique  
or pathology, but rather than capacity of the family  
leader to define his/her goals and values, while trying  
to maintain a non-anxious presence within the system"**  
(*Generations to Generations*, p. 2-3).

What is sometimes missed in the understanding of  
"**non-anxious presence**" is what Friedman called  
an awareness of "**differentiation.**" Differentiation  
is the capacity of

**"a family member to define his/her own life's  
goals and values apart from surrounding  
pressures, to say 'I' when others are demanding  
'you' and 'we' ... It includes the capacity to**

**take responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being."**

So the parable -  
the Pharisees and scribes are very anxious,  
they want simple ... powerful ... punitive  
in the Savior they seek.  
And they are pressuring Jesus to adopt  
their point of view.  
Jesus though differentiates himself.  
He does so with a parable where the parent  
is able to differentiate within a complex family system;  
the father isn't afraid to be the fool,  
for loving two children, so different,  
one lost and found, one lost and not knowing it;  
both in their own way needing  
mercy and understanding.

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Let me close with this.

I happen to be a big fan of the family  
system portrayed in the  
*Downton Abbey* series.

One of the more "**differentiated**" characters  
in the cast is the Lady Dowager (Maggie Smith),  
mother of Lord Grantham.

In a recent episode, the Lady has returned home  
for one purpose and one purpose only, to sort out  
Lady Mary's torment and chaos that was literally making  
the whole house a hell. Lady Mary was a mess,  
for she was caught in the misery of social convention,  
that denied her loving the person who loved her and  
whom she loved, which was Henry Talbot. Who will  
bring Lady Mary to her sense, and save her from herself?

The Lady Dowager:  
**"I believe in rules and tradition and playing our part.  
But there is something else ... I believe in love."**

Lady Mary:  
**"Oh granny, you do surprise me."**

This, of course, is what is in store for us.  
To be surprised by grace, and love,  
and God's relentless pursuit  
    of those who are lost,  
    and those who don't know it,  
until all thrill in the joy  
    finding their way home.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*