

Worthy or Not

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning

The 2nd Sunday of Lent

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 25, 2018

Text: Luke 15:11-31

The parable of the Prodigal Son is probably one of the best known of the parables of Jesus. It appears only in the Gospel of Luke where it is part of a trilogy of parables having to do with being lost and then found. Luke's version of the parable of the lost sheep, our focus in last Sunday's message, appears at the beginning of Chapter 15 followed immediately by the parable of the woman with the lost coin. In all three of these parables the emphasis appears to be on the rejoicing that occurs when something precious that was lost is found again. Understandable, certainly. But is this rejoicing something we can relate to easily, in our 21st century lives filled with disposable stuff and fluctuating relationships? I'm not so sure it is which is why we tend to miss the deeper meanings this ancient story holds for us.

At its core, this is a story about reconciliation – reconciliation with loss and its causes and outcomes; reconciliation between people when relationships are damaged; reconciliation even between different groups in society whose interests all too often seem at odds with each other. Think about the core elements of the story: Selfishness, regret and remorse, extravagant forgiveness and love; resentment that perceived

unworthiness rewarded. This is a complex, nuanced story worthy of a much closer look.

The parable begins with a younger son of a wealthy landowner asking his father for his share of the family inheritance to be given to him early. Some scholars say this is the same as saying he wishes his father would hurry up and die, but I'm not buying that argument. I think he was just a brash young kid who knew his older brother was going to inherit everything anyway so why shouldn't he get his inheritance early enough to enjoy it? I'm not convinced he intended to waste it all on what the scriptures call "dissolute living." I think he might have left with every intention of making his own way after having a little fun first. But a little fun quickly turned into too much fun and before he knew it, the money was gone.

He was too embarrassed to go home so he went and found a job, the only one he could get since a famine and coinciding economic downturn kicked into high gear just as his money ran out. So, instead of working on his dad's farm, he found himself working on somebody's else's, doing the most unclean job of all, taking care of the pigs. And he was prepared to hang in there with this awful job except there was no food for him. Food for the pigs, yes. Food for him, no. So, he pretty quickly recognized he needed to swallow his pride and go back home. At least my dad feeds his workers, he told himself. I'll go home and apologize to my dad,

telling him I know I am no longer worthy to be called his son. All I want is a job to provide for myself and I'm pretty sure he'll do that for me. And he heads home.

Now comes the really famous part of the story. The Father saw his son while he is still really far away and was so excited he ran to meet him. He hugged him and before the son could even get his full speech out about being unworthy, the Father cuts him right off in order to tell the servants to bring his son a robe, and a ring and sandals. Then he told them to prepare a great feast to celebrate that "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Not the reception the younger son was expecting at all. After all, the robe meant he was not a worker or a hired hand. He was the son of this man still. This was made even more clear by the gift of the ring, a symbol of his position and authority. And finally, the sandals. They meant he was most definitely not a servant or a slave, since they would be barefoot. He was to have sandals to cushion his feet. He was shocked.

But the story doesn't end here, although often we act as though it does. The story continues with the elder son, the one who stayed at home with dad to do all the work. He hears all the carousing going on as the celebration for his brother gets cranked up. He's out working on the farm as usual so he has no idea what's happening and he asks one of the slaves. When he hears that his father ordered a party to celebrate the return of his

spoiled brat younger brother from doing who knows what the family legacy, he is angry. Really angry. So angry that he refuses to go into the party. And that's when the father does something extraordinary, something very unusual that a wealthy landowner in this time and place would never have done. He goes out into the fields to talk with his angry older son. He does this because he knows why his son is angry and that his anger is understandable. The father goes to explain to him why he did what he did. "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." That's where the story ends.

We do not know if the older brother relented and went into the party to celebrate the return of the younger brother. We do not know if he told off his dad and stormed off in a huff. We don't know if he skipped the party but calmed down enough in a day or two to accept, and maybe even be happy, about the return of his wayward brother. We just don't know. And that, dear friends, is intentional on Jesus' part because the ending we imagine for this story says a lot about who we are and where we stand on our journey of faith, in our relationship with Jesus, in our understanding of the depth of God's love for us.

As I said earlier, this story is about reconciliation and too often we want to make this story about resolution. The two are

not the same, as my friend Rev. Sharon Key, will explain in our Kingian Non-Violence Training next weekend. Resolution means that a definitive solution to a problem is identified and enacted. There may well be a lot of give and take style conversation which goes into the resolution of a problem but at some point the conversation ends and a decision is reached. Winners and losers are identifiable and the losers are expected to make whatever adjustments they need to make to adjust to the resolution of the situation. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is always a work in progress. Reconciliation knows that resentment and anger and frustration never completely go away and must always be given the chance to be expressed so that things don't fester back into problem territory.

Both resolution and reconciliation are visible in this parable. The older brother is angry that the younger brother is accepted back with love, honor and respect by his father, in spite of everything wrong that he did and everything right the older brother did. The younger brother, on the other hand, is reconciled to the reality that he has lost his inheritance and can't expect anything more from his family than a job. The Father takes this son's reconciliation and expands it exponentially when he offers this son unconditional love and acceptance, caring only to celebrate that this much beloved son is home again, safe and sound. Notable here is that the father attempts reconciliation

with the older son, but we don't know if that possibility is embraced by him. All we know for sure is that the older son is furious with his younger brother for what he did and with his father for letting those actions slip completely into the past, obliterated by the Father's unbounded, unconditional love. The older son, at least initially, wanted the Father to impose conditions and boundaries on his love for his other son. This was something the Father was clearly unwilling to do. So, is the situation in this family resolved? Is it reconciled? We don't know.

The fact that we don't know how this story finally ended is precisely why it has so much to say to us in the current state of our society and our world. In this story, the notion of who is and is not worthy of the Father's love is central. We see how angry the older son is at the end of the story so it's not difficult to imagine he was equally angry at the beginning of the story when his younger brother literally took the money and ran. "Good riddance!" he might have shouted as his brother walked away. "You're not worthy to have any part in this legacy of our Father's." At this same point in the story, being worthy of anything was the last thing on the younger son's mind. He was out to have a good time and eventually have some sort of life, out of the shadow of his older brother. But, when times turned bad, the younger brother quickly realized what he had done and that he was unworthy of his father's love and forgiveness even though he

hoped there would still be some sort of spot for him in the workforce of the farm. As the story ends, the older brother is once again focusing on worthiness – his own and the lack of it in his wayward brother. Only the Father is unconcerned with worthiness because he knew both sons deserved his unconditional love and support in spite of all the things they both did wrong. For this loving dad, being worthy or unworthy wasn't a question. All that mattered to him was the boundless, unconditional, fierce love he had for both his sons, no matter what.

As we think about how this parable touches our own lives, it's important, I think, to be aware of the times we encounter the temptation to judge other people's worthiness. And, let's be honest, we do this all the time. We are quick to jump to conclusions about why people act or behave in a certain way, inserting our own sense of their worthiness into our value judgments about them. "Who does that person think they are, taking 15 items into the 10 item lane at the grocery store?" I do this. I admit. "Who does that person think they are, parking in a handicapped spot and then limping?" My mom did this all the time. When I finally got her a handicapped placard for the car she was unhappy because "it took the fun out of it" for her. Geesh.

Sure these examples are funny, and, real as they are, they're trivial. But what about those times when perceived unworthiness has big impacts and ugly consequences. Unfortunately, we see

this all the time in the news these days. I could recount dozens of examples on all sorts of issues where perceived worthiness and unworthiness play a central role in how societal problems are addressed these days. But, our focus this Lent is on the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity. So, as we think about these two issues and what needs to happen for these chronic problems to be addressed, I invite you to examine your own prejudices at work in how you think about these problems. If you assume homeless people are homeless because of something they did wrong, you are looking only for their unworthiness. If you assume that poor people are poor because they squander their money like the younger son on some sort of “dissolute living,” then you’ve already decided they deserve what happens to them. You’ve decided they are unworthy of the help they need to get on their feet again.

The thing is, too many voices in our country right now are urging you to do just this – judge someone else’s worthiness for assistance of any kind. And that, dear friends, is a huge problem. It’s a huge problem for two reasons. One is that Jesus states outright that we are to leave the judging of other people to God. “Judge not that you be not judged,” Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel. The second reason judging someone else’s unworthiness is problematic is visible in this parable of the Prodigal Son where it is very clear that worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do

with God's love. Truth be told, none of us is worthy of that and that's where grace comes in – God's love being unearned, freely given and freely received even by those most unworthy. So, if we believe this to be true for ourselves, then we must make the effort to realize it is true for others too. God's grace, God's unconditional love is a gift to everyone, even those people we feel are unworthy of any love at all.

Dear friends, we know we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have. Jesus told us this. Jesus also said, over and over again, we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. And this is the hard part. We are to love other people without judging who is worthy of God's love and who is worthy of our own. We are not to reserve assistance for those who need our help just because we think they're not worthy of it. Does this mean that everyone who asks for something receives it automatically? No. that would be foolish and irresponsible. What it does mean is that everyone deserves a second chance, and maybe even a third and fourth, to be the person God created them to be. If that means help to get housing issues resolved, so be it. We do what we can when we can to be the people God needs us to be, even when that means taking a risk on someone we think may be unworthy. Easy? No. Clear cut? Heck no! But then when is being a follower of the Risen Christ in this ugly, broken world ever an easy choice? Amen.