



WORSHIP AT HOME

*with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

**June 21, 2020
Father's Day Celebration!**

□ Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a small summer bouquet!

□ If you are doing this on your own, settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you.

- If you are joining in the prayers during the Facebook Live broadcast, before worship take a few minutes to send them to me via text, email or Facebook message. It is helpful for me to receive them at least 30 minutes before the service begins.
- A reminder I will be streaming our worship service on Facebook Live beginning at 9:45am. You can still access it even if you are not on Facebook by going to the church website, www.uccwesterly.org, and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

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Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you

Gathering Music – “How Firm a Foundation”

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CALL TO WORSHIP [excerpted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Editors, p. 94]

We gather once more in faithfulness, ready for the surprises that God's Spirit brings.
We open our lives to the presence of God and trust God's promise that we can live new lives of freedom and grace.

May God help us to be true people of spirit, letting holy surprises fill our days.

OPENING SONG – “Bring Many Names”

[WORDS: Brian Wren & MUSIC: Carlton Young; © 1989 Hope Publishing Company. . All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Bring Many names, beautiful and good, celebrate in parable and story,*

Holiness in glory, living, loving God. Hail and Hosanna! Bring many names!

2. *Warm father God, hugging every child, feeling all the strains of human living, Caring and forgiving til we're reconciled: Hail and Hosanna, warm father God!*
3. *Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing, Closer yet than breathing, everlasting home: Hail and Hosanna, great, living God.*

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION [*Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Editors, p. 102]

God of wondrous love, you have touched us and never left us in despair. You have held us in our grief and chaos. You have never deserted us. You paid us a visit and your visit never ended. You clung to us when we were given up for dead. In life and in death, you raise us anew. This we know, this we experience. God of wondrous love, touch us again this time. Stay with us as we continue healing our memories and our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

Written by the Rev. John W. Vannorsdall

[From A CHORUS OF WITNESSES, edited by Long & Plantinga, p. 204-211; excerpted from DIMLY BURNING WICKS by John Vannorsdall, ©1982, Fortress Press.]

Luke 15:25-32

The Elder Son's Defense

Preached by Rev. Ruth

A TIME OF PRAYER

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings*

*Doxology *"Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen."*

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CLOSING SONG – "Faith of our Fathers"

[WORDS: Frederick W. Faber & MUSIC: Henri F. Hemy; adapt. By James G. Walton. Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Faith of our fathers, living still, in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;
O how our hearts beat high with joy whene'er we hear that glorious word!
Refrain: Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.*
2. *Faith of our fathers, we will love both friend and foe in all our strife;
And preach thee too as love knows how, by kindly words and virtuous life.
Refrain.*

ANNOUNCEMENTS

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION – May you know always that ... The light of God surrounds you; the love of God enfolds you; the power of God protects you; and the presence of God watches over you. Wherever you are, God is already there. Amen.

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Music as the Service ends – “To Greet the Morning”

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SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

Written by the Rev. John W. Vannorsdall

Luke 15:25-32

The Elder Son's Defense

Preached by Rev. Ruth

With the Deacons' permission I am doing something a little different this morning. I am actually preaching a sermon someone else wrote. I am doing this for a couple of reasons. One, the Deacons have graciously recognized that if I don't have to write an original sermon every week, it does give me a bit more breathing room – something which has been in very short supply these last few months. Also, it gives you a chance to hear some wonderful sermons by some of the best preachers of the Protestant tradition. The Rev. John W. Vannorsdall is certainly one of those preachers as this sermon bears out. Heck, it's a textbook on preaching! But it also has a wonderful message that I think is a very appropriate one for Father's Day this year.

First, I would like you to know a little about Rev. Vannorsdall. He did some local parish ministry but his first love was college chaplaincy. He served as the Lutheran Campus Pastor at Cornell University and as College Chaplain at Gettysburg College. He also served as the University Chaplain at Yale University. From there he went on to serve in his final call as President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA. One final thing I'd like you to know about Rev. Vannorsdall which cinched it for me when I was deciding on a "guest" sermon for this morning. Rev. Vannorsdall just died this past Palm Sunday at the age of 95. He died of Covid-19. So, it seems very fitting to me that we honor this fine man and his legacy by hearing this amazing sermon once again. Do note that what makes this sermon so outstanding is that it is written from the perspective of the elder son from the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Told in the first person, it is a highly unusual preaching style that only a true gifted preacher could pull off! And now ... *The Elder Son's Defense*.

To All Concerned for Justice:
Greetings!

Year after year preachers great and small, in a hundred languages, lead you from the bathos of my younger brother's self-imposed exile to the sounds of dancing and leave you staring at me, disgusted because I will not share the celebration for the prodigal's return. It's time that you heard my side of the story, what it's like to be an elder brother and why I reacted as I did.

I should, I suppose, enlist the aid of a panel of experts. My brother has, after all, turned his case over to the worthy clergy who have so embroidered their bias in his favor that I can never hope to balance the facts by myself. It occurs to me, however, that many of the people of the world are themselves elder brothers, and, I hasten to add, elder sisters, and that our common status will facil-

itate a larger understanding. So I make my own defense in the hope that a simple, honest statement is all that's needed.

I cannot deny that one unlovely moment in my life to which the clergy point. I had come from the fields at evening, as has been reported, and when I heard the sound of dancing and smelled the roasting meat I was surprised and asked a servant what was happening. I cannot deny the jealousy and hurt that rose within me when I learned that it was a party for my wayward brother. I make no defense for my behavior. I cannot even say that I would behave differently should history repeat itself. But I want you to understand that I will regret it for the rest of my life. I hate the feeling in myself. I know that jealousy is the worst of me.

Without in any way defending my reaction, I do want to say what it's like to be an elder brother. I think you'll understand, and I need that understanding.

Let me say first of all that being an elder brother has something to do with being responsible. I'm not referring to chronological age, but about an elder brother syndrome that can occur in the life of anyone. And the most significant element in the elder brother syndrome is a sense of responsibility.

I was responsible for a large farm. We had servants, of course, lots of them, but there is a difference between being a servant and being an owner. Servants take orders, but owners are the ones who take responsibility. We are the ones who must decide when the fields are ready to plow and plant. We select the seed. Owners decide how many sheep the land can support. We decide when to shear the sheep. And since there will inevitably be bad years when the crops fail and the sheep die, it is our responsibility to see that enough food and money has been set aside so that the farm can continue and the servants be fed.

Do you think that I had no moments — even days, weeks, months — when I wanted to leave? That I have no hunger for wine, women, and song? Do you think I was born a drudge? No, I was born an elder brother, son of aging parents who looked to me to share the responsibility of being an owner. From the day I was born I was reared to be accountable, as though my parents, the servants, and all the generations to follow were dependent upon me. I was

reared to be responsible. I say this with only a touch of pride, certainly not with regret. I say it only in the hope that you will understand me.

There are those who come to a party, and there are those who work to prepare for that party, who see to it that the house is clean, that there is enough wine, that the fire is well built, and that the musicians are ready. There are those who go home from the party singing their happy songs, and there are those of us who clean up after them, who sweep the cracker crumbs and bits of smoked fish from the floor and wipe the white circles left by the mugs on the polished wood. There are those who come as guests and go home carefree, and there are those who prepare for the party and clean up when the revelry is over. I am one of the latter, you see. Usually,

I am not unhappy about this, nor offensively proud of it either. It's one of the roles in the human family, and I play it well. I am marked with the elder brother syndrome.

Let me say also that elder brothers are harder to love. I wonder sometimes why it is that people find it so easy to love people like my younger brother. (Notice that now I call him my brother. It was only in that awful moment of jealousy when the worst of me came out that I called him my father's younger son.) His offenses were so clear. He had wasted money that had come from generations of work on the farm. He had lived with harlots. He came home with nothing. Why is it so easy to accept the wayward? Perhaps they are so vulnerable that it's easy to accept them. They are so obviously in trouble that they pose no threat. Perhaps it's easiest to love people who are no threat — the fools, those who write their sinning large.

I have been pictured as self-righteous, the hardest of all to love. I know that. But look into your own hearts, you elder brothers and sisters, those of you who, like me, are responsible. You know that we are sinners, too. I work with the servants in the field, and as the sun grows unbearably hot, my anger rises and I find myself beating the ground so hard with the hoe that the handle breaks. The other day the goat kicked over the pail of milk again and, in anger, I kicked the goat. You laugh, perhaps, but it is of the nature of elder brothers and sisters to carry their anger, their sins, hidden

within their hearts. What did you expect? Should I go home and say to my father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Today I was angry and broke another hoe, and yesterday I kicked a goat?"

No, elder brothers and sisters are the responsible kind, and our sins are not obvious — nor easily shared. Therefore, we are harder to love.

I want also to acknowledge that being responsible has its rewards. I do understand that my father was right when he said, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." I know that, I really do. My satisfaction, the reward for my being responsible, is to look out over a field sprouting green and to take in the beauty of it and, in the harvest, to gather in the sheaves, exulting in the weight of the sacks of grain filled from the threshing floor. My reward is that of a job well done, of a household running smoothly with people fed and with provision against the times of famine, and the taxes paid. My satisfaction is in the respect of those around me, in being able to give to those in need. I am a gold watch person. We elder brothers and sisters, we are the ninety and nine who take care of ourselves, the ones whom the shepherd can leave to look for the lost.

As you can tell, I write these words easily. I know what our rewards are, coming quietly every day of our lives. But it is so hard to see that no-good son of my father. . . . Excuse me. It is so hard to see my younger brother come home empty-handed and receive the ring, the robe, and the shoes, to smell the roasting meat and hear the music for his dancing. Ah, the anger is not all gone, is it? I understand it with my mind, and I know how to say it with words,

that elder brothers are responsible and sinners like everyone else, the harder to love, whose rewards come quietly day by day. Gold watch people. I understand it. It's harder to make my emotions behave.

Well, that's my side of the story. But I leave you with a question. How shall we be saved, we elder brothers and sisters? How can we go home when we are already home? How can we confess the squandering of resources, the harlots, the months and years of neglect, when in fact we have built and not squandered,

not gone with harlots, and been responsible for preserving the family fortunes? How shall we be helped: those of us with our secret anger and the harlotry that stays in our hearts; those of us who are hard to love because we show so little need, who show only on rare occasions the jealousy that made me turn away from the dancing to become forever the ill-reputed elder brother? How shall we be saved?

I'll tell you what I think, and you may have some insight too. It would probably help if we shared with others some of the responsibilities that make our lives such a burden. Do we have to be owners in the sense that we make all of the decisions? Wouldn't it make for a less lonely and isolated life if we invited our servants to be partners in the productive process? Teachers and students could become collaborators in the process of gaining and sharing knowledge. Managers and those they now manage could become partners in a common enterprise. Children could share more of the responsibilities for creating a family, and by that I mean that children could help to make decisions and not simply respond to shouted orders. Do we not, by the very way in which we structure our relationships, create the burdens under which we chafe and grow angry? To become less owner-like, to enter into partnerships and to be collaborators — that could be a part of our salvation.

I suppose that this could be said in a less pompous way. (It has probably not escaped your attention that self-importance is one of the more obvious manifestations of the elder brother syndrome.) You'll remember that, among other things, I said to my father, "You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." The truth of the matter is that I never asked my father if I could have a party. I wonder about that. Somehow it didn't seem appropriate. There was always so much to do, not just with my hands — that's the easy part — but so much thinking to be done, so many problems to be solved. Thinking and problem solving don't mix with parties. Actually, I think I was concerned about the appearance of things. Would the servants and the neighbors look up to a person, depend upon a person who throws a party, drinks wine, and dances? A cocktail before dinner is one thing, but a party?

To be perfectly honest, I don't have many friends. I'm re-

spected, you understand. When I go to the bank, the teller calls me sir and my check is never refused. I like that. But there is a difference between respect and friendship. So you see, by assuming authority and by refusing to share it, I have set myself apart. I have fit myself into a total model of human interaction in which I have isolated myself and must behave according to the model. I never

asked my father for a kid so that I might make merry with my friends. Servants and prodigals dance. I have a drink before dinner. Servants and prodigals have friends. I have respect. Isn't there some other model for elder brothers? That's my question, and a larger sharing of responsibility could well be a part of the answer.

Another part of our salvation could be a fuller recognition of the gifts that come to us day by day as a consequence of our being responsible. If we could see more often the greening fields that we have planted and know our partnership with God; if we could see our growing children fed and clothed and rejoice in our partnership with them and with God; if we could rejoice to feed the hungry, to set some tangled person free — then we would probably find in these things a quiet joy, which is both our reward and a replacement for our anger. This would be a part of our salvation. My father said it well, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." And will our heavenly Father deny us this healing sense of partnership with him if we ask that he renew a right spirit within us?

The other part of our salvation must be the same as that experienced by our younger brothers and sisters, the prodigals. Our sins are not flamboyant; in many ways they are a little boring, but no less damaging. In fact, our hidden anger may be more damaging than their more flagrant sins, at least to those around us. In some ways it would be easier to repent of what is obvious, the extravagant sins of the far country, than to speak the pain of our jealousy and self-righteousness, the hidden anger and dark fantasies that come as we pursue our more ordered lives.

God knows these hidden sins, of course. Erect, we stand as solid citizens before the cross, but our hearts are bowed; he embraces us with his eyes, and not just those who are bent with weeping. There may be no turning spit and no music for dancing. We elder brothers are not the best of dancers anyway. But we go

down the hill from Golgotha knowing that he died for us, too. We go down to our green valley to see the field of sprouting seed, knowing that all that he has is ours, and we are his.

- O God, creator of the elder brothers and sisters
of the world,
have mercy on us.
- O God, redeemer of those unmasked by a moment
of jealousy,
have mercy on us.
- O God, sustainer of those who receive gold watches,
grant us your peace.