

Generations of Fathers

Luke 15:11-24 ~ June 21, 2026

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Good morning and welcome to UCC Westerly's celebration of fathers on this beautiful June Sunday. Once again, as with our Mothers Day Celebration in May, we do not observe the convention of having an apostrophe (') in either Mothers or Fathers Day for the simple reason that we choose to honor fathers generally on this day. In other words, we recognize the biological truth that everyone has a father. The other truth is that some fathers are wonderful and some are awful. Once again, this simple reality does not preclude our celebration of the uniquely special roles fathers play in our lives. Hopefully you were someone blessed with a wonderful father, or at least a father who did the best he could with the cards life dealt him. If this was not your reality and your father was either absent from your life, or present but not so great, we are inviting you to honor in your heart this day a man – teacher, coach, scout, mentor – who made a difference in your life.

So, I'm guessing this Scripture describing a father's relationship with his son – also known as the Story of the Prodigal Son – is no surprise on this day when we celebrate fathers. It's a sort of obvious choice as it describes the relationship between a father and his two sons. The oldest son, the one who never got into trouble, probably got good grades in school and did all the work in the family business – he's not the one the parable is about. He is important to the story nonetheless as we'll hear later. But, our focus today is on the younger son, the wild son, the spoiled brat son. I always think every time we read this particular story most of us probably identify with one or the other of the two sons. This is true for the women who read this story as well as the men. It's no surprise any daughters in the family depicted in this parable aren't even mentioned because, after all, in

this patriarchal society, the daughters didn't really count. They weren't in line to inherit anything. None the less we can assume they're there, no doubt preparing the special meal at the end of the story as the wild son comes back home. It's not impossible that there could have been a wayward daughter in the mix, but she would just have been written off as a whore and that would be that.

Still, what is clear in Jesus' telling of this story is that men and women alike are tacitly invited into this story to consider for themselves – to consider for ourselves – who we connect with in this story. Are we the good son, the responsible elder son who does everything right all the time? Or do we identify with the wild younger son whose desire to escape became a defining reality for him? Clearly, the younger son had become resentful of all the expectations of home and his father, as well as the very long shadow of his seemingly perfect older brother. These feelings of “just wanting to do his own thing” eventually overcome him and he decides to leave home. He asks for his share of his inheritance early so he has some funding to start on this new carefree life he is imagining. Surprisingly, dad agrees.

The young man then takes off for parts unknown and before he even realizes it, his money is just gone, wasted quickly on living the crazy, irresponsible life of wine, women and song he had always dreamed of. When he realized the money was gone, I'm guessing he was pretty shocked – at himself and that he had actually blown everything. He did realize, at some point, that money does not in fact grow on trees and that if he wanted to eat and have a place to live he would have to earn some money, a new experience for this child of privilege. Apparently, the job market was as tight then as it is today for young folks just starting out without a family to help get them a start in life. After all, he had already asked for everything coming to him from his family, and then he blew it. Literally with nothing left, he finally realized for himself that the party was over and it was up to him to change his life. Except, he couldn't. He couldn't find a job.

Maybe folks knew his story – that he walked out on his family in order to party. Maybe times were tough everywhere. We don't know. Whatever the reason, he could not find a job until one day a farmer finally hired him to feed his pigs. Now, let's not forget this wild and crazy son was also a Jew so feeding pigs was the ultimate and degrading indignity since pigs were considered unclean in the faith he had been raised with. But he accepted the offer of work, soon realizing that he still didn't have enough money even with this degrading job to feed himself and he was hungry. One day he looked at the pigs, looked at the food he was feeding them and realized enough was enough. He knew his father's hired hands had more than enough food to eat and a place to live so he decided to go back home, apologize to his father, and beg his father to take him on just as a hired hand. He had no expectations of being received by his father as anything else.

This is why he was so totally shocked at the greeting he received from his father. As soon as his father saw him approaching, he was just overjoyed, filled with compassion and love for this son whom he thought was gone forever, now coming back to him. He ordered his servants to bring his son a robe and sandals and even a family ring to wear once more. Apparently, the father figured out the original ring he had given his son was long gone, sold when the boy hit bottom. But the father didn't care. All that mattered to him was that his son was back home where he belonged. The father ordered a feast to be prepared to celebrate his son's return. We can imagine the son is overwhelmed but also so very happy. His father understood even better than he did himself, that he had indeed been lost in his own greed and selfishness but now he had found his way back home again. He felt as though he had been dead and now this unconditional, totally forgiving love of his father for him returned him to life. He also knew something else. He knew he didn't deserve any of it. And that was the biggest miracle of all – his father knew that too and did it all anyway. Nothing was more powerful than this father's love for this,

his wayward son. This wild son's return home changed his life, his father's life and the entire household he was returning to forever. It was, quite literally, transformative.

Now of course, there are a few more verses to this story that we didn't read today. They're the ones which describe the reaction of the older son, the responsible son, the good son to all this. This older son was, understandably, more than a little angry. His father sees his anger and tries to assure him that the father's love and forgiveness for this younger son's bad decision making has nothing to do with how much he loved his older son. He tells this son, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found." And this right here is, to me, the most profound lesson in the whole story. Why? Because the older son never answers his father. We don't know what the older son decided to do. Did he eventually go into the party for his wayward brother. Did he believe that his father still loved him as much as he always thought? Or, did his anger overtake him so that he took off for parts unknown just as his younger brother had done. We just don't know. We don't know if he ever forgave his father, or his brother for that matter. What we do learn from this parable told by Jesus as it comes to an end is that one son is overwhelmed by his father's love and forgiveness which he knows he doesn't deserve. The other son is crushingly disappointed that his father so easily forgave this wayward son.

Now that, dear ones, is a real family soap opera. No wonder it is one of Jesus' most well known and oft told parables. And it is a parable, meaning it is a story told as a metaphor by Jesus to teach an important lesson in the simplest way possible. So, what do you think the metaphor is in this story? (*Pause – A father's love for his sons as a means to understand God's love for us.*) Here's another question, probably the most important one. In this story, if God is represented by the Father, who do the two sons represent? (*Pause*) Us. So, which

one are you? Are you the younger son, the wild one who ran away from God and invested your life and your money in the wrong stuff until one day you realized something very important was missing in your life? OR, are you the responsible older son, the one who's always done what was expected, done the "right" thing whatever that meant in the moment. And, the one who resented the heck out of the father for loving the wild son so much that all the poor decision making was unconditionally forgiven.

So, which one of these sons sounds like you? Or perhaps you're somewhere in the middle between the two? Sometimes you're the one backing away from responsibility because you're sick and tired of expectations and obligations you just don't care about anymore. Other times, you're the dutiful one, the responsible one, the one who usually finds the time to do what's expected. You're not the extreme of either one. You don't run away, but you're not that excited to be in that same old "doing what's expected of me" rut. In fact, you're getting sick of it. Well, dear ones, I think that's most of us. Sometimes we just want to book – run away from all the unending expectations and just have some fun. Other times, we're proud of ourselves for being the responsible one, the one that others rely on. And therein lies the truth, dear ones. Each of us is neither one or the other of the two sons in this parable of the Prodigal. We are a little of both of them. Yet, the result is the same. God loves us unconditionally, and against all odds. God loves us when we are wild and irresponsible. God loves us when our reliability is almost too much to bear. God loves us just because. And that is the miracle of God's love for us.

In this parable, as we have already talked about, the Father represents God. And, on Father's Day, we have this unique opportunity to think about all the men in our lives who have loved us when we were wild and irresponsible and when we were working too hard at being perfect. This is a day to remember the stories of our own lives grounded in the stories of these men whose love for us and

confidence in us made all the difference. And, I would argue, our fathers learned how to be fathers from the men who raised them, and those men who raised them taught them learned how to be fathers from their fathers, and so on and so on. The interesting thing about examining these fatherhood lineages, though, is the unique opportunity it offers to understand how sometimes men learn the kind of fathers they want to be simply by knowing they do not want to be the kind of father or grandfather, or great-grandfather who raised these generations up. Think about this story of the two sons of the father offering unconditional love. I'm thinking the wilder son who was forgiven after so many bad decisions would want to teach his children to learn and experience both unconditional love and the importance of responsibility. The older son – well, we just don't know what wisdom he took away from the whole experience. What we can be assured of, though, is that learning comes from both positive and negative experiences of things, and parenthood is no different.

This is why I asked you to bring photos of your fathers and grandfathers, and even great grandfathers if you could. If not, you were invited to just include all these important men in your life on the note cards you filled out earlier. The simple truth is that you have been gifted by God with the presence of all these men who have been part of your life. They are part of you and always will be. What you decide to do with that gift is, and has always been, completely up to you. God bless all the fathers here today and all the fathers represented by the people in this room. May those still with us know how much they are loved. May those in God's nearer presence know that too.

Happy Fathers Day. Amen.