



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Lost and Found,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on February 6, 2011

Last Sunday I called your attention to two of our stained glass windows here. I said they illustrate the parable of the lost sheep and of the prodigal son, which are two stories dear to Universalists because they affirm that the nature of God is love. After the service our minister emerita Janet Bowering said to me, “You need to take a closer look at that window on the left. Those aren’t sheep.” She’s right--they aren’t sheep, they’re pigs. I’m not sure when I decided that window on the left was about lost sheep, but clearly I never looked at it close enough to see the difference. This reminds me of the importance of community. As the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed says, “alone our vision is too narrow.” We need one another. Thank you, Janet, for being my colleague, and for helping me to see.

Both of these windows illustrate the parable of the prodigal son; they show two pivotal points in the story. The one on the left is when the son is at his lowest point, taking care of pigs. And the one on the right is when he comes home.

At the outset I want to remind you that this parable came out of a patriarchal culture, so it’s no surprise that the characters are all men. But they could just as easily be women. So feel free to imagine them that way, if it helps you to enter the story. That’s what I invite you to do now--to imagine yourself in this story. Of the two sons, which one do you most identify with?

Jesus told this parable in response to criticism from the Pharisees and scribes, who questioned the company he kept, who said, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The Pharisees and scribes were the purists, the ones most concerned with the letter of the law. They were people who would say, “You get what you deserve.” Who would say, if you are poor, or lame, or sick then you must have done something to deserve that. But in this story Jesus says God doesn’t work that way.

The parable begins with the younger son asking for his inheritance, effectively saying to his father, “Your money is what I care about--you are dead to me.” The son leaves town, and must have felt the exuberance of being all on his own. Do you remember what that feels like? In the days after I left home for college, I could have shouted to the rooftops, “I’m free! I can do whatever I want!” The prodigal son does just that, spending his money recklessly until it’s all gone. But then a famine hits. The economy tanks, unemployment shoots up, and the only job he can get is slopping the pigs. Everyone hearing Jesus tell this story were Jewish. Pigs were unclean, and it

was forbidden to be in contact with them. When they heard this, the crowd must have gone, “Ooooooh--that’s bad. That’s really bad.” It would be like a vegan being forced to work in a feedlot or in the kitchen at McDonalds.

It’s here, surrounded by pigs, so hungry that he would eat the slop if he could, that he realizes how bad his life has become. Some translations say, “he came to his senses.” I love this moment in the story. When it becomes crystal clear what is important, what needs to be done. When finally you see and understand what really matters. And the truth is, sometimes you have to get to a pretty tough spot, sometimes your world has to be cracked wide open before you come to your senses.

The prodigal son comes to his senses, he realizes that “Even the servants in my father’s house have it better than I do.” He decides to return home and confess his faults. All the way back he practices his confession: “I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.”

We don’t know how long he’s been gone, but I suspect it is a long time. Because he has been changed. He’s grown up, and sees things differently now.

I was talking about this story with my daughter on Friday, and she said, “So what’s the moral of this story? You can go off and do whatever you want, and if you say you’re sorry all is forgiven?” She’s talking about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Bonhoeffer, whose faith led him to resist the Nazis and to be killed for it, said “cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” In AA and other twelve step programs, once you admit you have a problem, you are required to seek out those you have wronged and make amends. Of course, this isn’t easy. The prodigal son did not expect cheap grace. He asked only to be a servant in his father’s house. He said, “I don’t deserve to be called your son.”

The story says the father saw his son when he was still a long way off. Was he always looking toward the horizon, hoping that his son would some day return? He runs to his son, and there may have been a practical reason for this. Other villagers may have been angry that this scoundrel had returned, and would have wanted to make an example of him, so their children wouldn’t get such ideas in their heads. The father may have run to his son in order to protect him from an angry mob.

The son tries to confess, but the father doesn’t listen. His son has come home. He was dead, and now he’s alive! The father calls to his servants: “Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast!”

There’s no lecture from the father, no “I told you so.” The prodigal is welcomed with open arms. The Pharisees must have been shocked. I have to admit, if I were the father, I would find it hard to resist saying something like, “Have you learned your lesson? If you’re going to live here, you’re going to obey my rules!”

But I am more like the good son, the one who stayed home, who did what was expected of him, who believed that we get what we deserve. Are any of you like that? You do your part, even more than your part sometimes, you pick up the slack for others, and you do this because it feels good. Until it doesn't. Sometimes you find yourself getting resentful, angry even, that others aren't pulling their weight. It's not fair! "Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends?"

At the start I asked who you identified with more--the prodigal or the son who stayed home. Each has its light and its shadow. Maybe you are a free spirit, never wanting to be tied down, and you need to learn how to live in community, responsible to and accountable to others. Or maybe you are a solid citizen, always doing the right thing, but sometimes seething inside that others can be such slackers. You need to remember that it's not all up to you, that it would be good to let go of some things and do what makes your heart glad. The good son says to his father, "Have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends?" The father could have responded, "Have you ever asked me to?" If you're like the good son, try asking for what you want, and see what happens.

Jesus told this parable, and others like it, to expand people's thinking. In particular, to show that those too concerned with the rules and right behavior are like the good son--doing the right thing but with a hard heart, keeps you outside, fuming, while there's a party going on.

We don't know if the good son got over his anger and self righteousness and went in to celebrate. We don't know if he ever realizes that, though he's never left home, he's the lost one now.

Do you know what "prodigal" means? It means wasteful, extravagant, spending freely without reservation. The real prodigal in this story is not the son, but the father, the one with the open and loving heart, the one who gives freely to both his sons without counting the cost, who says, "Everything that is mine is yours." Who welcomes the wanderer home, who says, "We have to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!"

What if you imagined God that way? As one always waiting to welcome you home, always ready to throw a party and celebrate when you come to your senses and remember who you are and whose you are.

Jesus told this story to open people's hearts and minds, to help them see in a new way. To show them the God that he knew, the one who inspired and empowered his liberating ministry. Through this parable, he offers us the same invitation--to imagine God as more generous, and more loving, and more forgiving, than we have known.

I invite you try on those images we sang of earlier, of God as strong mother, and warm father; as old and aching, as young and growing; as mystery beyond our seeing, yet closer than our breathing, as everlasting home.

The old hymn says "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." That's the invitation, and the call. To come to our senses. To live beyond our brokenness. To be transformed

by that amazing grace, that we become prodigal people, giving ourselves freely, spending our lives on what matters, welcoming those who need us with open arms, living with hope and with joy as we do our part to heal and bless our world.

Amen.