

fathers and sons

First Congregational Church Branford

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Rev. Suzanne Personette

Let me say some things before we read scripture. As we get closer and closer to Holy Week, we should acknowledge how it came to be that Jesus was beaten and hung on a cross. Here's the thing, the Pharisees and Sadducees were conservative political and religious parties. Scribes and chief priests studied religious law. They *all* held a conservative outlook and accepted only the written Law of Moses, laws which were rule-based. Jesus is Holy Spirit based. And, he has new ways - all of which greatly disturbed the ruling class. For instance, tradition held that Yahweh was distant and hard, and that people had to go through the chief priests who would go into the Holy of Holies of the Temple and access Yahweh on their behalf. Jesus comes along and says, "God is your Abba, your daddy, your father - you can access him yourself!" Well, that was just beyond blasphemy! People weren't supposed to talk directly to God! One day when the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about how Jesus welcomes sinners, Jesus used it as an opportunity to tell a parable of a *forgiving* Father instead of a judging divine figure off in his heavens, only willing to talk and listen to certain kinds of people! Jesus uses parables to teach, say something about who God is, *and* to indirectly confront the system. Keep in mind when you're listening and/or reading today's parable that the prodigal son in the story represents tax collectors and sinners, and the elder son represents the ruling class. Listen at the end of the story for how Jesus *tries* to gather in the ruling class at the end - just like a hen gathers her brood...

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I

am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' ” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ²²But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ ‘Now his *elder* son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” ³¹Then the father* said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.” ’

The word of God for the people of God.

Let us pray. Loving God, may your presence be known in this message today and touch the hearts of your people. Amen.

Our Jesus was passionate to let *everyone* know the Good News that God is going to love you no matter what. That’s what he was all about, that was his big message. At any given time in our life, maybe we’re the father in today’s story, or the wayward son, or the rule-based, jealous, resentful son. Consider which one you are today in this parallel story I’ve written.

Ahh, you should have seen my father that day. He sure wasn’t the man I’d grown up with -- Well, I guess we’ve all changed a bit since then.

My father had been a hard man. He wouldn’t listen to anyone -- it was his way or the highway. My brother and I fought all of the time--competing for the crumbs of love from dad, I guess. My brother was first born, and he resented me that he couldn’t be the *only* son! Our mother had died when we were young boys. I can still smell her perfume. And, how Father had been so much better *with*

Mother...

My brother took the most responsibility around the house. He was always trying to prove himself - doing everything *just right*. He never made a mistake. He was perfect. But, no matter, nothing he did made our father give out any strokes. There *were* no strokes to get from father! I saw my brother running around in circles trying to be appreciated so it seemed pretty senseless to bust my back being a dutiful son. I decided to have a good time instead! I had lots of girlfriends, and played a lot of sports. Boy, did my brother resent me something terrible. I was free and he was tied down - but, hey, that was the choice *he* made.

I got awfully sick of the rivalry and fighting. My brother and I couldn't stand each other, and father never had a kind word to say. When he had anything to do with us at all it was just to tell us what was wrong with us. I called him Judge. After high school, at 18, I went to him and said that I had to go try my wings. His old ways were tying me down. I shamelessly asked for my inheritance upfront. He gave it to me - frankly, I think he was probably happy to be rid of me!

Did I have a good time! I wandered the world. I kept thinking I was going to get a job but that just seemed like a bad idea - any time I thought about working I remembered my brother grumbling over his chores. I wanted the free and easy life. I had plenty of money. I gambled, I won more money. I bought a fancy car.

Then, I started running with a fast crowd. Besides drinking heavily, I began doing drugs, then later selling drugs. I spent a year in jail. I got off easy - the sentence was for 10. I was put on the street, penniless, without skills and unhireable. In desperation, I sold my body. One night, after an especially degrading evening, I laid on the bed and cried like a baby. It had all gotten so out of control. My life, who I was. I was so alone. I thought about committing suicide. I didn't have the energy, so I decided to sleep on it. See how I felt the next morning.

When I awoke, the strangest feelings came over me. I believed that my father and my brother hated me, but they were the only family I had, and I knew that I needed them. I knew that I needed help. But, I knew that I could not go back as I had once been -- so pompous. I didn't want to fight my father and my brother anymore. I just wanted to live. I just wanted to go **home**. Three years had passed. I was terrified of how I would be received. I would beg for my father's forgiveness -- tell him that I had neglected the family, that I was not worthy of being his son, but could he please give me another chance. I would learn to do my share, and not look for reward. I would make right with that brother of mine. I was afraid of what my father would do, but I gathered bus fare and struck out for home.

Well, I got off the bus at the top of our block. I could see my father in the distance mowing the lawn. I had butterflies in my stomach. I wanted to turn

around so badly. But, I kept walking down the lane. I saw my father take his cap off and wipe his brow. He looked up, his mouth dropped open, and he started running toward me - my father doesn't run - he has a bad hip, and it was clear that his knee was troubling him now - but, still he ran - tears were streaming down my face - he wrapped his arms around me - my **father** wrapped his arms around me and he began to sob and he couldn't stop sobbing. He kissed me and wouldn't let me go. We just stood there, holding each other up. Finally, I told him what a wretch I'd been, and that I really wasn't worthy to be brought back into the household. I was 21 and he should send me away. My father couldn't say anything - he just shook his head. *He just kept holding me.*

We started walking toward the house. He turned off the lawn mower and we went inside. He gave me a big drink of water, and he told me that we would have a feast that night - that we would grill out the very finest steaks and drink lots of dark red wine. This certainly wasn't the scene I'd played out in my mind's eye! I wondered what must have happened to change my father in these three years. What gift had time given him? He got on the phone and called a bunch of people and invited them over to celebrate my coming home.

I asked about my brother, and my father said that he would go talk with him. He lived a couple of houses down. Apparently, my brother was angry and he told my father that he would not come to the party. Father pleaded with him - he told him we had all been estranged -- that maybe we could be a family now. My brother told father that he had been loyal to him; he had stayed, he had cared for things, and he had gotten nothing for his efforts, while I had been ungrateful and reckless and was being congratulated for it! My father **saw** him in that moment, not just his anger and jealousy, but he saw my brother's longing, and he wrapped his arms around my brother -- the **same** loving arms that had been wrapped around me, and he said, "My darling son, have no fear, you are always with me. All that is mine to give is yours. I am sorry for how I treated you. Please forgive me. I love you so much. Come, let's celebrate and rejoice, first born of mine! Let's be a family. Your brother was **dead** and has come to life. We all have a *second chance*. Come home... My brother took it all in. He didn't know what to do.

What an unbelievable evening. Being forgiven before I had even asked for forgiveness. I was simply welcomed home - there were no questions about where I'd been, why I hadn't come back, who did I think I was, or that I needed to make up for my sins - there was just joy that I was *home*, once again in the presence of my Father.

What have I learned? That there's nothing greater than Father's forgiveness - no questions asked. No judgment. Just love. You can't beat the hugging! I've also learned that when you've experienced forgiveness, it sure is a lot easier to give it away.

Oh yeah... you wanna know if my brother showed up that night of rejoicing.
Well, that's for *you* to decide... Amen.