

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, March 6, 2016)

Texts:

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (NRSV) [This scripture was presented in church via a flannelgraph presentation.]

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

"There was a man who had two sons. The 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So 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. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, '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.'"

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Drink Up!"**

I was intrigued this week by the placement of this particular parable in our lectionary readings for year C, which we are in right now. I mean, here we are in the midst of Lent, shouldn't we be continuing with Jesus's journey to the cross as we approach Holy Week and Jesus' triumphal march through Jerusalem in just a couple of weeks? But instead, we find ourselves in the midst of our wilderness journey being asked to sit a while, as if by a cool oasis and listen to a parable – one of my favorites – about a young man on another journey. This particular parable is found only in Luke's gospel, and none of the others and while, as Neil Elliot points out in *The People's Bible*, "North Americans tend to focus on the moral choices the younger son makes and to judge them," I think we

can look at this story in a much different way and glean even more from it than those basic fundamental judgments handed down from generation to generation. Indeed, I had to adapt our flannel-graph presentation today from the original 1957 text that included conservative commentary along with the story, although I couldn't help leaving in phrases such as, "his heart was merry and gay," and "could that be his gay, young son? Yes!" I doubt whether the writers of the original 50's text could have ever imagined their story being told with such a twist of meaning years later.

But what I saw in this story, as we discussed at our well populated LEAP of Faith Bible study Wednesday night, were people on a journey, finding their way through another kind of wilderness than the desert themed one we've been looking at throughout this season of Lent. Here not only is the young son going on a journey, but so is the father and even the older brother as each person is affected by the actions of the others. What could the Christ be telling us through each of these journeys and where do we see ourselves in this story of relationship and reconciliation? Whose story is it really?

I've come to believe that it's a story for all of us, no matter where we find ourselves on life's journey. It's a story about welcome, about forgiveness about allowing one another the freedom that God so freely gives us. It's about the amazing grace of God to hold out arms of welcome no matter who we or where we have wandered. I think there's a character for each of us at the different stages of our lives and in the many journeys we take throughout our lives.

In our LEAP of Faith session, we divided up ourselves into three groups representing the younger son, the older son and the father and tried to listen to the story from each of their perspectives to see how the story changed depending on your experience of it. Much like life, isn't it? We hear from our own perspective and tend to act out of it, sometimes forgetting that others journeying through the experience with us often have a completely different perspective from our own; something Jesus keeps pointing out to his disciples and especially to those religious authorities who keep coming up and asking him questions with only their perspective in mind and conviction.

But what if we tried to embrace all the perspectives proffered in a story such as this? What if we could embrace the younger son's desire for freedom and fun, the older son's desire for fairness and fundamentals and the father's desire for reconciliation and repair? Could seeing each of these perspectives help us gain a wider understanding not just of the story but of ourselves and each other?

Have you ever fought the ties that bound you, wondering if, as the song from Sweet Charity say, "there's gotta be something better than this?" Have you ever broken out on your own, wandered far from home and found that life wasn't quite as sweet or charitable as you thought it might be? I know I have. Making the journey from a tight-knit, covenantal community such as I grew up in on the east coast to the wild and wooly west nearly 30 years ago, I often thought of this story of the prodigal son and wondered if I had made the right decision to strike out on my own and leave the security and rewards of my family home. For me, I believe it was the right decision although it has entailed many experiences of loneliness and despair. I can't say I ever hungered after the pig's pods, but sometimes sitting in an audition room with 40 other guys hoping to get cast in a hemorrhoid commercial seemed to come pretty close!

So you see, my perspective on the story casts the younger son in a bit of a different light, although my journey, such as his, did bring me back to my eternal parent who showed me love and forgiveness and reconciliation and continues to do so much like my earthly parents have.

Many people hearing this story relate most keenly to the older brother. He who keeps his nose to the grindstone, doing everything right, following the ways of his father and his community day in and day out, only to see his younger profligate brother who threw it all away come back and not only be welcomed with literal open arms but celebrated in a way he had never been and given a robe and a ring to boot!

In her commentary on our text this week, our UCC theologian Kate Huey points out, “Barbara Brown Taylor's delightful reflection on the older brother recalls [and what] it felt like to be the oldest child herself, watching younger ones get away with so much more than she had: Instead of the punishment, or at least discipline, the younger son so richly deserved, he got a party! It's just not fair, right? "What do you have to do to get a party around here?" Here she poignantly observes the ways that both sons are lost to the father, one to irresponsibility, and the other to self-righteousness. Taylor describes the love of the father who, like any good parent, gives his sons unconditional love instead of what they have coming to them. [She] then suggests that we who imagine ourselves in the older brother's place will end up on that doorstep, too, struggling with our own self-righteousness, and will have to make the same difficult decision to join the party, or to stay out in the cold with our principles.” Fantastic!

And then, of course, there's the father. He who stands in for all parents and for all of US, really, as we must decide whether to focus on retribution, retaliation or reconciliation – those 3 r's that can be even more difficult than reading, writing and arithmetic! For, in this instance, as in many we will find ourselves, we must decide whether we will show the same grace, forgiveness and love to he or she who has left us, rejected our values and maybe even taken advantage of us in some way, or if we will stubbornly refuse to grant grace to those who have gone their own way and left us in the dust.

This kind of discernment can take a heaping helping of God's own grace to help us know what is best for all concerned. Is there a place for what's been called “tough love” sometimes? Are there relationships that can be destructive and even abusive? Most definitely. Is reconciliation always possible?

“If Lent is a season of reflection [and] contemplation, particularly on our human brokenness and our need for God's redemption, I think Lent helps us see the “lostness” of all of the characters in this story,” Luther Seminary Professor Karoline Lewis wrote in her article, “Perspective Matters” this week. “Lent helps us see the reasons, the instances, which lead to severed relationships, suspicion, and an unwillingness to admit our own faults. Lent helps us see our desire for extreme autonomy when it could very well cut us off from community. Lent helps us see when and how and where we think only of ourselves. Lent helps us see our true motivations for our actions and our true motivations for apology or repentance. Lent helps us see when we truly are in the depths of despair. Lent helps us see our deep longing for love and yet the only way out seems to untether ourselves from those in whom love might be real.”

Whichever perspective speaks to you the most today, you can be assured that you will probably hear the story from an even different perspective the next time it rolls around for that is the journey we are all on.

“Lent is a particularly potent and poignant perspectival time,” writes Professor Lewis, “not just for its contemplative mood, but for the sake of admitting our own perspectives on and commitments to the meaning of Jesus' incarnation and death. At the same time, Lent can become one “perspective” through which to view this story. What difference does it make to hear the tale of the Prodigal Son in Lent instead of Easter, Pentecost, or Epiphany? What does the season make you see that you have not realized before?”

I'll leave you with this Haiku by Rev. Bob Elder:

Look in the mirror.  
Prodigal, elder, father.  
All wrapped together.

Amen.