

"The Prodigal Son"  
Sermon and Worship Service for  
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County,  
Wooster, Ohio  
November 17, 2019  
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister  
Janice Baxstrom, Worship Associate

Chalice Lighting by the Rev. Erika Hewitt (Janice)

"To 'encourage' means to hearten; to impart strength and confidence. This is our work, as a religious community: to encourage one another; to be bold in engaging the world around us, as well as what scares us internally; to give one another the confidence and heart to live as fully as possible. With full hearts, we affirm our relationships with one another; we recognize our agency and our connective power; and we accept our responsibility to be bold and courageous. We light this chalice, symbol of all that we are, all that we have done together, and all that we will be as our shared ministry encourages those within, and beyond, our walls."

Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence (Rev. Jennie)

Spirit of Love, Comfort, and Hope--

As Thanksgiving, and other winter holidays and holy days, approach, we feel concern in our hearts for all who are, in their relationships, isolated or estranged, conflicted or regretful. In the coming winter months, we wish for peace of mind, warm companionship, festivities that nourish bodies and spirits, and new insights, new friendships, and new horizons. We pray for the sustaining of our hopes for peace and goodwill in our town, state, nation, and the world. And we give thanks for the ways our lives are plentiful, comfortable, and lovingly connected to this, the congregation we love. We give thanks for examples of empathy, solidarity, and loving kindness, and all who speak truth to power. And we pledge to honor and mirror those examples ourselves. For all the blessings that come to us each day, we give joyful thanks, Amen.

First Reading: Luke 15: 11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Rev Jennie)

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me." And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise 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 as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And 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 servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to make merry. Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

Second Reading: "The Bridge," from *Generation to Generation – Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, by Edwin Friedman (Janice)

There was a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. He had experienced many moods and trials. He had experimented with different ways of living, and he had had his share of both success and failure. At last, he began to see clearly where he wanted to go. Diligently, he searched for the right opportunity. Sometimes he came close, only to be pushed away. Often he applied all his strength and imagination, only to find the path hopelessly blocked. And then at last it came. But the opportunity would not wait. It would be made available only for a short time. If it were seen that he was not committed, the opportunity would not come again. Eager to arrive, he started on his journey. With each step, he wanted to move faster; with each thought about his goal, his heart beat quicker; with each vision of what lay ahead, he found renewed vigor... Hurrying along, he came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring. He started across. Then he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, it seemed as though the other were coming to greet him. He could see clearly, however, that he did not know this other, who was dressed similarly except for something tied around his waist. When they were within hailing distance, he could see that what the other had about his waist was a rope... The other began to uncurl the rope, and, just as they were coming close, the stranger said, "Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end for a moment?" Surprised by this politely-phrased but curious request, he agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it. "Thank you," said the other... and jumped off the bridge... "What are you trying to do?!" the man on the bridge yelled. "Just hold tight," said the other. "This is ridiculous," the man thought and began trying to haul the other in. He could not get the leverage, however. It was as though the weight of the other person and the length of the rope had been carefully calculated in advance so that together they created a counterweight just beyond the strength to bring the other back to safety. "Why did you do this?" the man on the bridge called out. "Remember," said the other, "if you let go, I will be lost." "But I cannot pull you up," the man cried. "I am your responsibility," said the other. "Well, I did not ask for it," the man said. "If you let go, I am lost," repeated the other. The man on the bridge began to look for help. But there was no one. How long would he have to wait? Why did this happen to befall him now, just as he was on the verge of true success? ...There was no way to get rid of this newfound burden, even temporarily. "What do you want?" he asked the other hanging below. "Just your help," the other answered. "How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I can go and find

someone to help me help you." "Just hang on... Just remember, my life is in your hands," said the other. What should he do? "If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this will haunt me forever." ...As time went by, still no one came. The critical moment of decision was drawing near. To show his commitment to his own goals, he would have to continue on his journey now. It was already almost too late to arrive in time. But what a terrible choice to have to make. Then a new thought occurred to him. While he could not pull this other up solely by his own efforts, if the other would shorten the rope from his end by curling it around his waist again and again, together they could do it. Actually, the other could do it by himself, so long as the man standing on the bridge kept it steady and still. "Now listen," he shouted down. "I think I know how to save you." And he explained his plan. But the other wasn't interested. "You mean you won't help? But I told you I cannot pull you up myself, and I don't think I can hang on much longer either." "You must try," the other shouted back in tears. "If you fail, I die." The point of decision arrived. What should he do? "My life or the other's?" And then [suddenly] a new idea. A revelation. So new, in fact, it seemed heretical, so alien was it to his traditional way of thinking. "I want you to listen carefully," the man on the bridge said, "because I mean what I am about to say. I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; the position of choice for your own life, I hereby give back to you." "What do you mean?" the other asked, afraid. "I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug a little from here." The man on the bridge began unwinding the rope from his waist and braced himself anew against the side. "You cannot mean what you say," the other shrieked. "You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me." The man on the bridge waited a moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope. "I accept your choice," the man on the bridge said at last, and freed his hands.

Homily "The Prodigal Son" (Rev. Jennie)

As Thanksgiving, and the winter holidays and holy days are approaching, in the weeks ahead we will find ourselves at gatherings of extended family, or parties in our workplace or neighborhood. And so we will find ourselves in conversations with some people whose life choices, or values, or beliefs we disagree with. How do we stay in right-relationship with such people?

One of the main authorities that clergy look to for answers to those questions is Edwin Friedman, and his book, *Generation to Generation - Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. His theories are also called "family systems theory." Those theories have been enormously helpful to clergy and social services professionals since Friedman first published them in 1985. But it's also been said that his book isn't the most readable text on this subject. What is a lot easier for many people to read and reflect on, and apply to their lives in helpful ways, is his supplemental text called, *Friedman's Fables*. So I wanted us to hear, as our second reading this morning, the first parable in that collection, called, "The Bridge." That parable can be a starting place for us to reflect on how we can strive to stay in right-relationship. And it raises many questions for us all-- including what, if anything, more we should do when someone says they will be lost without us, and we help them see choices they have of ways they could improve their lot, and they are not interested in pursuing those choices.

Friedman, himself, names some more questions that this parable raises. These questions include:

- How does this parable get played out in families, schools, congregations, and business organizations? And
- How would you get the man hanging from the rope to take responsibility for himself? And
- Why do people who are needy often get most needy when others around them are functioning best? [In fact, Friedman's moral of this parable is: When things start going really well, watch out.] He also raises the questions:
  - Could both men be the same person? And the biggest question:
  - How much responsibility does the man on the bridge have for the other?

Friedman would say that, in order for a member of a family or a congregation to grow, we have to be differentiated enough from them that we are not over-functioning –not trying to do their work of growth and development for them. Friedman writes that the two key elements in a healthy relationship are being a non-anxious presence with one another, and resiliency. He says this is actually very hard to do. Most people who care about another person [or even about a project, or other work] have a natural tendency to over-function. Then there isn't

enough emotional distance. A family member feels emotionally smothered and so leaves, creating physical distance. But the unresolved emotional issues remain, despite the miles. The better way to create space in a relationship is to develop “the capacity to define [one’s] self in the relationship, and [the capacity] to control one’s own reactive mechanisms.” [see p. 42] In other words, when we feel someone is pushing our buttons, we should take time to get our head on straight about it, remember not to take it personally, and cool down so we can respond in a non-anxious way. Friedman says doing so will go a long way toward family members and the whole family becoming healthier emotionally. When Friedman writes, “the capacity to define [one’s] self in the relationship,” we call that having appropriate boundaries. In general, knowing what your boundaries are means knowing where you end off and the other person begins. It means knowing what your feelings are, and what are the other person’s-- what your issues are, and what are the other person’s-- what your beliefs and values are, and what are the other person’s. And it means our ability to accurately take in feedback and either accept it, modify it, or discard it—and our ability to recognize other people’s boundaries and not violate them. When you have good boundaries, you are able to:

- Be around someone else who is feeling intense feelings without taking their feelings onto yourself;
- Determine what your responsibility is in a conflict and what the other person’s responsibility is;
- Respect the other person’s right to privacy, and their right to their own internal world of thoughts and feelings;
- Recognize that you won’t live or die depending on whether someone likes you or not; and
- You are able to say “no” without feeling guilty.

Having good boundaries means realizing that we have responsibilities *to* other people-- the responsibility to encourage, support, listen, be fair and empathetic, and be truthful, clear, and timely in communicating. But, ultimately, we are not responsible *for* another adult. Ultimately, it is not our responsibility to fix, nor rescue, nor control them, nor to carry their feelings. We can help people see the many possible choices they do have before them [and we *should* help them see

those choices]. But, ultimately, people have the right to make their own life choices. And the consequences of those choices are theirs to live with.

The much more well-known parable about entangled complex family relationships is the parable of the prodigal son. Though it is familiar to all of us, it's worth a second look. Its reunion of a father and two dramatically different sons has much to teach us about how to be in healthy relationship with each other, such that we help each other to grow and develop into our fullest best selves.

How many of us even know what "prodigal" means, anyway? Before looking it up, I might have guessed that it meant one who alienated his family, then repented, then returned to the fold. But "prodigal" actually means "so extravagant as to be wasteful." As such, that's a way of acting that can be spiritually unhealthy for the person and those close to the person. And when we really look at the prodigal son's father, we can see where the prodigal son may have gotten his extravagance from. The father had a tendency to be generous, which is good, but to a fault, which can end up doing more harm than good in the long run. The older son, on the other hand, was not a risk-taker. He obeyed rules and stayed within reasonable limits. That's good— But he ended up resenting his lot, and that tainted his relationships. A middle way —a way of moderation— is spiritually healthier over the long run— neither over-indulging nor overly-depriving oneself. That way of moderation is, in fact, what the Buddha taught, and how Buddhists still strive to live today, as a spiritual practice. It's a little hard to imagine how the family in the parable is going to achieve healthier spiritual practices. The three of them have some unhealthy habits to break.

When a family member is in a pattern of destructive behavior like the prodigal son, Friedman says that just telling them to stop it generally doesn't work. But what you can do, he writes, is challenge the person. You can challenge them to raise the bar of the choices they are making. Friedman would probably suggest that the father say to the prodigal son, "If you will try to make healthier choices, I will try to stop putting you in the role of the 'black sheep' of the family; I will try to stop expecting that you will keep messing up." This family in the parable really needs a fresh start and a clean slate. And for all his errant ways, the younger son has given them the opportunity to begin again in a more healthy way. He really looked at himself and his patterns of behavior and his lot in life. He admitted his mistakes, and declared that he is turning over a new leaf. I admire that. There is hope for this family. But they will need to re-covenant with each other. They'll need to vow not to forget that the other is a human being. Being

human means both potential for greatness and the fact that we will sometimes mess up. They will need to try to see the best in one another and not expect each other to be perfect. They will need to remember that they don't need to solve all their relationship problems all at once. They'll need to promise one another that they will act with respect and compassion, such that no one ends up feeling used, nor even overlooked. Being compassionate isn't exactly the same thing as being kind. Being compassionate may mean saying to someone, "You have talents and potential that you are neglecting— You're wasting abilities and missing opportunities. I'd like to see you do more toward becoming your fullest and best self."

Imagine if your challenging some others in your life to make healthier choices resulted in their renewed commitment to meet a higher standard in all their relationships-- like a no-longer-prodigal son.

\*Closing Hymn #331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All

\*Parting Words (Mother Teresa)

(Rev Jennie)

"Do not think that love, in order to be genuine, has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies." [and] "Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin."