

Sunday, March 7, 2016

**HEBREW SCRIPTURE** Joshua 5:9-12  
**EPISTLE** 2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
**GOSPEL READING** Luke 15:11-32

**MESSAGE** *Where is your focus?* Pastor Beth Hood

Today's readings speak of the power of honest human speech, heard and answered by a God who delivers us from burden and bondage to freedom and possibility. These readings testify that even before we speak, God, as loving parent, waits for the wandering child.

The Gospel story this morning is not one of my favorites, but it does resonate with me.

Every neighborhood, every school, and yes, every family, has produced a prodigal of some kind.

Two of our sons were described as young men who would do well whatever they did. One of our sons was my challenge. And his answer was frequently to leave home, leaving his parents heartbroken and his brothers angry. This is the child who taught me faith.

I think the message I take from this morning's story is different than the usual theme. The two young men in the Gospel story are self-absorbed. Both of them.

The younger son finds himself pinched by the constraining limits of family life. He wants to experience the thrill of the unknown. He was a self-indulgent pleasure-seeker. Even upon his return, he comes across as a master manipulator. We are never quite sure that his repentance is 'true'.

The story might as well be titled 'the resentful brother'. The older brother has done everything expected of him and I picture him to be quite smug in that role. And he does not join in the joy of his brother's return, refusing to join the party. Separated by his self-righteousness.

These brothers might have learned something from our youngest son. He struggled most of his life with a condition called paroxysmal dystonia. This child who could often lose complete control of one half of his body became an excellent athlete and an outstanding human being.

The secret was that when he focused on something other than himself, there was no sign of the dystonia. And this child urged me to do something with my faith.

How would the story of the two brothers in the Gospel have been different if they had looked beyond their own wants?

The verses preceding this morning's lesson are the parables about the shepherd who left 99 sheep to find one lost sheep and the widow searching her house for a lost coin. We can imagine that all of these parables happened in the same area. Imagine if the brothers had gone to help neighbors in the search for the lost lamb. Or if they did what they could to help the widow? If only they, and we, could look beyond our own wants.

Both sons, each in his own way, misunderstands the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the elder cannot let go of sacred canons and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home. They call us to reassess our own standards and the basis of our relationship to God.

What if we focus on the father, living out God's prodigal mercy as Christ's representatives in the world? The father that Jesus portrays acts out the love and compassion of God. The father in the parable gives and gives and gives.

Though his younger son's request is tantamount to wishing his father dead, the father gives as he asks. And when the younger son returns, his father gives him a robe, ring and sandals, symbols of his status as heir once again. And he throws a lavish party.

And when the older son is resentful, his father offers a gracious blessing, "all that is mine is yours'.

On this Sunday of One Great Hour of sharing, can we do less?

As the sons might have been more, if they had focused more on the lives of those around them than on their own petty wants; as the father was able to overlook the pain his sons brought him; how much more can we be by looking beyond these walls?

Our journey through Lent has involved looking at ourselves, our church in self- discovery in order to find a natural mission. At the same time, it has been to discover how much more we can do in community than on our own.

The UCC's One Great Hour of Sharing contributes to missions around the world-disaster relief, helping the plight of refugees, feeding the hungry. It also supports two efforts right here in Maine. H.O.M.E. (Home Workers Organized for More Employment) is a multifaceted organization involved in economic reconstruction and social rehabilitation. Its motto is "Serve First Those who Suffer Most". And Habitat for Humanity of Greater Portland.

Brothers and sisters, we have been called to manifest God's righteousness and to be ambassadors of Christ's love.