

Before Heaven
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Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ

One day, when I was about twenty nine or thirty, I received a phone call from my father. That was a surprise! It has always been a rare event to get a phone call from Dad. My mother tends to handle the family communications. So, right away I wondered why *Dad* was calling. And, I will admit, I may have been just a little bit worried, too. Was something wrong with *Mom*? Why else would *Dad* be calling?

Well, it turned out that Dad wanted to invite my family to a big picnic that his Rotary Club was putting on. That was *another* surprise! He has always been one of those Yankee men...*you might know the type*... he tended to be kind of independent of his family, especially when we were growing up. When my sisters and I were young, my parents often hid us when company came over to visit. And Dad didn't do much to mingle the worlds of his peers and my friends even when I came of age. So, this invitation was really unexpected. I happily accepted and planned to join him and Mom at the picnic.

Well, the day came around and the Morton clans gathered on a big picnic blanket under a warm summer sky. My sisters were there with a kid or two in tow, along with my Mom. There were lawn games, plentiful barbeque and the inevitable kegs of beer that accompanied Stowe Rotary Club events. Everything was in place, and everyone was there...except Dad. When we arrived he was off visiting some friends. "Fair enough," I thought, "There is lot's to do and all sorts of people to see. I am sure he'll be around soon..." An hour or so passed. I caught up with my sisters and Mom, and played with my nephews and kids. Then Dad made a brief appearance, said hello, hung out for a few minutes and then was off to another group of friends. Another hour or so passed. More family talk and play ensued. Hot dogs were eaten, and maybe a beer or two. Then Dad breezed through, said a few words and was off again. Then it all happened over again. And then I went home.

I was pretty dispirited. It felt a little like a bait and switch. I hadn't realized just how much I wanted to hang out with Dad until I didn't really get to at that picnic. I had been holding the hope of beginning something new between us. But it just didn't work out that day. That's how it is with family sometimes. Sometimes we think things will go one way, and then they go another way entirely.

The same is true for the parable Jesus tells this morning about a family. Things go other ways than we might expect. First, the younger son in the family asks an outrageous question. He has the sheer guts to ask for an inheritance *in advance*. That was unheard of. Inheritance didn't

work like that in the times of Jesus. It hardly ever does now, even. In Jesus' day, the bulk of the inheritance went to the eldest son, and the later sons got hardly anything. And no one got *anything before* the father passed away. But here the second son *receives* an inheritance while the father is *still alive*.

Now, it may have been a bad choice for the father to give it to him, because that son turns right around to spend it all on what the author Luke refers to as “dissolute living,”¹ which means he wastes it quickly and efficiently on passing pleasures. Then, completely out of resources, he hits rock bottom, and finds himself feeding pigs. This is a really low blow on two counts. First of all he doesn't even earn enough to feed himself well. He finds himself hungering after the stuff he is feeding the pigs. Second and perhaps worse for him, he is feeding *pigs*—a forbidden, non-kosher animal for Jews. This is perhaps the most hateful task he could imagine.

But then he gets a great idea, which the text renders quite poetically, I think. It reads:

“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.”’²

So, he sets off to humble himself before his father, hoping only to be treated like a servant. This was another outrageous action, and another place where the societal expectations of the day aren't met. He had already bought himself out of being a son to his father by asking for his inheritance in advance. It was the equivalent of saying “we're done, Dad, bye-bye now.” To return and ask for any sort of mercy—even simply to be treated like a hired hand—would be pretty much scandalous.

Well, then it is his father's turn to behave outrageously. Any other father of the day would have gone about his business without giving a wayward child another thought. But, in this morning's story the father appears to be on the lookout for his lost son. Not just glad passively hoping that he might return sometime, but really searching for him. The text reads “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*.”³ This father is *searching* for his son. This father runs out to *embrace* and *kiss* his son. This kind of love is unheard of for those times. And it doesn't stop there. The younger son has scarcely spoken the speech he had practiced to beg his way back into his father's good graces, when the father expresses a still more outrageous love.

¹ Luke 15:13b.

² Luke 15:17-19.

³ Luke 15:20b.

He orders up a parade of gifts for his son. First, the best robe he has, a ring, sandals, and then the best part yet—the fatted calf. This last gift may not seem so great to the vegetarians among us, but the calf fed *the whole family*, and even the servants—everyone was called into this party of reconciliation.

But not everyone *wants* to join in the celebration, do they? Someone holds back. He even gets angry about all this outrageous, over-the-top affection: the elder son! And here the father is on the lookout for his other son as well. Noticing his absence at the party, he comes outside to talk to him. The elder son lays into his father, touting his own righteousness, reminding him of his hard work and obedience, and grouching that he never received any sort of special party. By contrast, when the outrageous son returns after wasting his father’s gifts to him, *then* a party gets thrown. Again the father demonstrates an outrageous love. He does not return anger for anger, but instead reminds his eldest son that everything he has belongs to him, and that in staying loyal they have known the gift of one another’s company. But the youngest son was cut off from that relationship, and only now—having repented—could he begin to embrace it again. Again the text reads like poetry: “(W)e had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”⁴

It is an amazing story of one father’s unbelievable acceptance of both his sons—the one who honored him while harboring some bitterness, and the one who abandoned him completely only to return unexpectedly. And the lavish party illustrates just how important repenting—returning to our most essential and basic commitments—was to Jesus.

The story is often interpreted as either an illustration of the life to come, or an allegory of God’s love for us. It is fruitful to look at it either of these ways, and this approach has served many Christians well over the years. However, there is a problem with only looking at it that way. Keeping the story as a description of God’s character which is possibly set in heaven keeps it out of the reach of more common experience. The more obvious setting of the parable provides a clue about how to understand it more immediately and more intimately. It is not set in heaven. It is set *before heaven*, in a fully human realm.

It is set in the context of a family with some obvious dysfunctions. Isn’t that just like every family we have ever known? For some people, their families are a place of deep struggle and pain. There are sometimes shameful secrets locked away from public view. Abuse—whether emotional or physical—is all too common in families throughout the world. Every human family has some level of dysfunction and unrest. Not one of us comes from a perfect family.

⁴ Luke 15:32

There really *is* no such thing. The one thing you can always count on in human relationships is that they are bound to be imperfect because we human beings are imperfect.

So, this parable serves as a model of how we can do better in our families. This parable indeed models God's love—not as something far away and abstract—but as something which can be practiced in the familiar human realm of family. This Godly love is not just in heaven, but also *before heaven* between humans. Or at least it can be when we follow Christ's examples.

Not every human family is capable of attaining this kind of love. Some families are too broken to overcome their dysfunction. So God has given us another setting before heaven in which to practice being a family. And we are sitting in it together. In church we are called to provide a supportive environment for one another, under God's rule of love.

And that's the good news of the Gospel this morning. Even when our human families fail us, we can go another way entirely, and turn to our family here. A family gathered together not just by flesh, but also by the Spirit of God. Our church family gives us the opportunity to live into being a holy family here and now, so that in this life before heaven, *we can practice being in heaven. May God bless us to provide heaven to one another even before heaven.*

Amen.

Luke 15:11-32

11Then 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 traveled 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.’”