

**Rev. Tina S. Lang • Sunday, March 6, 2016**  
**Text: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21**



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | [www.fumc.org](http://www.fumc.org)

“What if?” Those are two words I tried to use every day when I was teaching. There were other words that followed those two words eventually forming good, complete questions, but “what if” was always the starting point. As a music teacher, there were several “what if” songs I liked to teach. One of those songs is represented in the visual that Max Wendt created for us today. “O, would you like to swing on a star, carry moonbeams home in a jar, and be better off than you are, or would you rather be a mule?”

It’s a fun little song that goes on to describe the stubborn mule whose brain is weak because he chooses not to go to school, and the thoughtless pig who doesn’t give a feather or a fig, and the fish who’s slippery but still gets caught. In between each animal verse the children would repeat that refrain, “O would you like to swing on a star...and be better off than you are...” and that musical storytelling reminded them they had choices to make, that they could choose to behave like a stubborn mule or thoughtless pig or slippery fish, or they could go to school, care for others, make good choices, and eventually they could be swingin’ on a star.

Storytelling is a good teaching method. Jesus was a master teacher and brilliant storyteller. The scripture lesson we heard today is one of Jesus’ teaching stories. It is the story that has long been unofficially titled “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” and I’m really glad the title is unofficial because I think it’s a pretty poor title. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” makes it sound as if this is a story about one son, and as if there’s something unusual about a wayward son. We know better. We know there’s nothing unusual about a wayward son because we’ve all been there. We’ve all been the wayward son or daughter or friend or colleague or neighbor. They are us and we are them and based on the definition of prodigal as “being wasteful and careless” I’d say both sons in the parable were prodigal. So this is not a story about *a* prodigal son, but prodigal *sons*.

Both were wasteful and careless: first, with their father’s feelings, then the younger son was wasteful and careless with his share of the inheritance, and the older son was wasteful and careless with the opportunity for reconciliation. But whether the unofficial title indicates prodigal son or sons isn’t really the concern. It’s that there’s nothing particularly unique about either of the sons or their behavior and neither of the prodigal sons are the leading role. The really unique character in this parable, the one who is truly the leading role, is the father. What if, instead of “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” this story was titled “The Parable of the Loving Father” or “The Parable of the Extravagant Father?” That title really seems much more appropriate because everything in this story hinges on the father. Through his extravagant love, the father becomes the leading character. What if we gave the parable a new title? Would we hear it differently? Would it more readily get us thinking about acting more like the father than the sons?

The parable’s title doesn’t seem to fit quite right, but it also seems that the parable is out of order. Not just that the relationships are broken and figuratively “out of order,” but the story itself seems sequentially out of order.

Long before propriety dictates, the younger son requests his share of the inheritance. That’s completely “out of order” in the sense of being both an inappropriate and untimely request, but what’s even more “out of order” is the response the son receives. The father hasn’t yet died, the older son hasn’t yet received his inheritance, but at the younger son’s request, the father goes ahead, and with rule-transcending generosity, he gives the younger son his inheritance, which naturally reduces resources left for the older son and for himself. The inheritance process is out of order for one child and that puts things out of order for everyone else.

And things continue to be out of order in this story even when it comes to the point of forgiveness. Listen again to a little section of the parable. “...the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth...when he had used up his resources...he got up and went to his father. While **he was still a long way off**, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. **His father ran to him**, hugged him, and kissed him. **Then** his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ The inheritance process was out of order and now the forgiveness process is out of order.

Before the son had even arrived at his father’s gate, before he had uttered a single word of regret or apology or request for forgiveness, the father, filled with compassion, ran to his son, enfolded his son in warm embrace and welcomed him home with yet another extravagant display of generosity.

Isn’t asking for forgiveness supposed to be the first step in the process? In this story the father runs to his son and is celebrating before the son ever says a word. Things are out of order in this story and they’re out of order because it’s not just a story about forgiveness, it’s a story about grace. The father’s generosity and love and welcome are readily present at all points in the story for both sons, before, during and after behaviors that would seem to prompt requests for forgiveness...it’s a story about amazing grace.

We’re often encouraged to put ourselves in the places of the characters of a story and I think the psalm assigned as part of today’s lectionary helps us put ourselves in the places of the two brothers in today’s parable. Think about the different experiences of those brothers as you hear the verses from Psalm 32.

“The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy! The one the Lord doesn’t consider guilty—in whose spirit there is no dishonesty—that one is truly happy! (Surely that was the experience for the younger son) “I’ll confess my sins to the Lord,” is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin. Don’t be like some senseless

horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that! You who are righteous, rejoice in the Lord and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!" (This could have been the experience for the older son. It seems he thought his heart was in the right place, always doing everything his father expected. He could have celebrated his brother's return along with his father.)

The psalm invites both brothers and all of God's people to lives of joy! "...Don't be like some senseless horse or mule...don't be anything like that...but rejoice in the Lord and be glad!"

Both brothers had the choice to be like stubborn mules, or to share in the joy of welcoming, loving, reconciled relationships. Scripture reminds us that we have that same choice and that even though we often behave like one or both of the sons, we have the choice of behaving like the father. But if we choose to become followers of the Christ, the choice to behave like the father becomes our mandate. The seal of Christ upon the brow is the warm, loving embrace that calls us to offer embrace to others. One of the other scripture passages assigned for today reminds us of that call.

In the second letter to the Corinthians Paul says, "So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them." Like the father in the parable who would not count the sins of his sons against them so Paul says God is with us. And his letter to the Corinthians goes on. "He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, 'Be reconciled to God!' God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God."

Even in the midst of Lent, this is a day of good news, a day for rejoicing because as today's scriptures remind us this is another day of new beginnings, a little Easter for us right in the middle of Lent, another day when we are reminded that we have been created and gifted by a God of extravagant generosity; a God who gives us the freedom to make choices, to strike out on our own, sometimes even stubbornly wandering, wastefully and carelessly, far from home, far from the center of all that sustains life and love. But this is a day of new beginnings for us because God's choice has been made and there is no wavering from that choice. God's choice is always, always the choice of love.

But God's limitless love for us is as hard for us to imagine as it was for the younger son to imagine that his father might allow him to return home anything more than an extra hired hand left to live in disgrace, forever rejected and separated from family. But that extravagant father offered his younger son a new beginning. And God's joy in extending grace and in offering welcoming embrace with absolutely no exclusions is as hard for us to imagine as it was for the older son to imagine that his father would offer forgiveness and then celebrate by giving even more to his no-good, wayward brother. But the extravagant father offered his older son a new beginning too as he said, "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours." It's hard for us to imagine that kind of love and forgiveness, and grace and generosity. It's hard to imagine especially if we only allow ourselves to step into the shoes, or sandals, of the two brothers. But what if we put ourselves in the place of the father?

What if we committed ourselves to that father's extravagant, out of order, rule-transcending generosity; a generosity not just in terms of material things, but a generosity of spirit, a generosity of compassion, a generosity of forgiveness? What if we let grace lead us through life? What if we consistently chose understanding and empathy? What if we dug down deep inside to find our best selves and committed to being our best selves and held one another accountable to being our best selves? What if, instead of resting in our privilege, we decided to speak up and act up on behalf of those who are denied the rights and privileges we so enjoy? What if we insisted on justice? What if we chose reconciliation even with those who trespass against us and who never choose to ask forgiveness? And what if we just kept choosing reconciliation over and over again? What if we chose to be the storytellers for our community and nation and world? What if we chose to tell and live the truth that God is ever-ready to welcome, to fully embrace and to celebrate with all God's sons and daughters? What if? This is a day of new beginnings and the choices about who we will be and how we will live are ours to make. I pray that we choose well. Amen.