

WHAT THE MOTHER SAW
Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore
August 27, 2006
Texts: Luke 15: 11-32

Reader: Hear this familiar story that Jesus told from the 15th Chapter of Luke.

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.

Storyteller: Yes we had two sons, two beautiful sons and we couldn’t stop looking at them and exclaiming about how wonderful our family was. The oldest was the most serious, even as a tiny baby. With his dark curly hair and his brown eyes he seemed born with a purpose. He was such a good little boy doing everything that my husband or I asked of him. Now his younger brother was different. He had curly hair but it was a coppery red and he had freckles scattered across his nose. And even as a very young child he had a wild imagination. He was a dreamer and loved playing with his friends. He was not good about doing his chores but there was with that adventuresome spirit a real affection for everyone. That wild spirit, that pushing of the boundaries continued even when he became a young man.

Reader: 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.

Storyteller: Now my husband and I had argued often about how to handle the boys. I always thought he was too easy on them. When they were little I wanted to make sure they were always in sight. I said it was to keep them safe. I thought only I who loved them could keep them choosing the right way to behave. My husband thought that even when they were little they needed the practice of making their own decision. When I would get upset he would hold me and say, ‘They will only stay close if they make the choice’. I didn’t believe that and I continued to argue with him about the best way to raise these boys. So you can imagine how I objected when our younger son asked for his share of the property. I cried and ranted and raved. I would have done anything to stop my husband from doing what he did. He divided the property. And of course, you know what happened.

Reader: 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.

Storyteller: I cried myself to sleep for many days when our younger son left. Something inside me knew that no good would come of this. I berated my husband over and over again. Then we heard from some people who had traveled through that distant country. They saw our son in the company of people no parent wants a child to be associated with. He was living the kind of irresponsible life that seems to lure some children. He was spending money wildly they said. More tears, more berating. I wanted to go and find him and bring him back but my husband said that we could not, that we had to allow him to live his own life. I had to be content with asking anyone who traveled there to see if they could find him and bring me news of his welfare.

Reader: When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country and he began to be in need.

So we 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.

Storyteller: Well, the next news I got made me wish that I had not asked anyone to report to me news of my boy. They told me that when they passed the field full of pigs and saw the swineherd feeding them, they said to each other, “Why that swineherd has hair the color of Martha’s younger boy” They could not believe that our son, even with all his wildness could ever break the law that way. Our family had always kept the laws and we knew that God, through Moses and Aaron had declared pigs unclean animals. But when they looked more closely they saw that indeed it was our younger son. He looked hungry and his clothes were in tatters and he had hired himself out to a farmer. More tears, more anger at my husband for his disagreement with me. I wanted to run to bring back my son, not just because I missed him but because I wanted him to return to the values, the life that God desires for us all.

Reader: 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.”’

Storyteller: I could not imagine what he was thinking. I was ready to say that he was dead to me. I began thinking that I had but one son, a fine man with curly brown hair and dark brown eyes who worked on the farm with his father and obeyed the laws of God.

Reader: 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.’

Storyteller: Then came that day I will never forget. Down the road I saw a glint in the sunlight... what I had often imagined I saw for that dreadfully long period of time- the sun glinting off some coppery red hair. I turned away, not daring to hope and filled with anger. I was going to wait- make him come to me. I took one more peek to see if it was true. But what I saw was my husband not waiting for our son to come to him and apologize, not waiting for him to admit how wrong he had been, not waiting for the boy to even get on to the path that lead to our front door, my husband hiking up his cloak and running, running with no regard for his dignity, showing whoever might see his bony knees, running as if he could not get to our son quickly enough, running as if the most important thing in the world was to hold our son close. No punishment, no reprimand- only an embrace. And those words from the mouth of our wild son- “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Reader: But the father said to his servants, ‘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.

Storyteller: I was stunned. My husband did not put him to work. He called for a robe, not garb for working and a ring and sandals.... The servants do not wear sandals. He called for a fatted calf to be slain and cooked. My husband wanted to have a great celebration. It was not as if he suppressed his anger. It was as if there was no anger. Just delight. Just love.

Reader: 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 servants and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he 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 kill the fatted calf for him.’

Storyteller: I agreed with my older son. This wayward child did not deserve a celebration. I had not yet spoken to or hugged my younger son. I was still waiting for him to apologize. I wanted him to know how he had made all of us suffer. Then I heard my husband speak to our older son.

Reader: 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.’

Storyteller: So what I saw that day taught me a lesson. My husband, running out to meet our young son...running as if all that mattered was embracing this young man who had broken our hearts... that taught me about unconditional love. Love when it is given unconditionally is a gift. That gift has no strings, nothing can be done to deserve that gift, all that is to be done is to receive it, open it and come to the party. Thanks be to God.