

Luke 15:12-24 (KJV)

¹² And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

¹³ And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

¹⁴ And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

¹⁵ And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

¹⁶ And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

¹⁷ And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

¹⁹ And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

²⁰ And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

²¹ And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

²² But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

²³ And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.

Merton: "On the source of all our sorrow and suffering"

From *The Silent Life*

A (person) *man* denies reality and turns away from truth in order to make himself the center and the *raison d'être* of the universe. The inner, basic, metaphysical defilement ...is his profound and illusory conviction that **he is a god and that the universe is centered in him.**

We seek what one might call a relative omnipotence: the power to have everything we want, to enjoy everything we desire, to demand that all our wishes be satisfied and that our will should never be frustrated or opposed... It is the insatiable thirst for the recognition of the excellence which we so desperately need to find in ourselves to avoid despair. This claim to omnipotence, our deepest secret and our innermost shame, is in fact the source of all our sorrows, all our unhappiness, all our dissatisfaction, all our mistakes and deceptions...

There are many acceptable ...ways of indulging one's illusory claims to divine power. One can be, for example, a proud and tyrannical parent-or a tearful and demanding martyr-parent. One can be a sadistic and overbearing boss, or a nagging perfectionist. One can be a clown, or a daredevil or a libertine. One can be rigidly conventional, or blatantly unconventional; ...Some satisfy their desire for divinity by knowing everybody else's business: others by judging their neighbor, or telling him what to do.

Since all this is manifestly impossible...such a soul is inevitable subject to insecurity and fear... man drives himself wild trying to will what is impossible, trying to verify and prove his impossible claim to be a "god".

What is the answer?... The interior pride... must be crucified on the Cross of Truth. Love of Truth delivers him from fear, strengthens him in charity and enables him to live and act as a child of God. "For the truth shall make you free." (John, 8:32) The truth is what is real, actual. It is true because it *is*. And that is what the monk is seeking: reality. He seeks that which *is*.

Sermon: *The Road to Resurrection*

Here is the irony. Knowing I would be reading my new favorite passage from Thomas Merton (explaining that we are not gods, we do not influence the universe or the weather, and that just because we want something does not necessarily mean that we are going to get it) this has not stopped me all week long from hoping for spring like weather. For the week when I would be preaching at First Unitarian on the subject of resurrection, nice weather seemed to be a reasonable request. Yet as a friend of mine in Virginia asks, "How is that work'in for you?"

Even though tomorrow is officially the first day of spring (good luck with that), on Wednesday the predicted low is 6 degree. So the *flowers that bloom in the spring tra-la* are nowhere to be found in New England. Even the crocuses are still buried in snow.

The poet, T.S. Eliot recognized the problem in *Little Gidding*.

*Midwinter spring is its own season
In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers. This is the spring time
But not in time's covenant.*

Time is such a mysterious framework for our lives. It hardly seems like almost 7 years since I have been retired from this pulpit. Thank God, so many of you are still here! And there are so many wonderful new members. And the music from the choir is still glorious, and still makes me cry. In *time's covenant* everything changes, and yet what is real and true abides. I have missed the people of the First Unitarian covenant greatly. I have missed the profound blessings of sacred music.

But I do not envy Rev. Sarah Stewart's formidable assignment to lead liberal religious worship in these troubled times. What seems catastrophic to me is

- The global climate- with the threats of North Korea, and rising fascism in Europe, and the tragedy of Syria, (and you can fill in the rest)
- Then there is the political climate in the United States. May God have mercy on our souls.
- Then there is the "climate" climate. As the devastating impact of global warming only increases, we bury our heads further into the sand.
- And then there are the garden variety of individual challenges; like death, and aging and illness; like raising healthy children and how to shovel frozen snow. Then there is disintegrating housing, and racism, and sexism, etc.! (You can write these lists as well as I can.)

If our present day issues are massive and grave and overwhelming, what was I thinking when I chose to come before you on the topic of resurrection? If, as Merton insists, the spiritual seeker has to focus on truth and reality, what business do we have in entertaining discussions of dreams and fantasies of rising from the dead and heading out in the direction of joy and reunion and peace? Even on a purely physical level, while spring will eventually make it to Massachusetts, all the little tender buds and shoots that came up early only ten days ago are now quite frozen and dead. (At least they are in my garden.)

Yet resurrection, I would argue, is exactly the right topic for the mid-winter spring. Between melting and freezing is precisely the time when all of us need to be reminded of resurrection. The word actually comes from the root, meaning *to rise again, to change, to become whole and complete*. It has everything to do with the Hebrew word *tikun*, meaning restoration. Resurrection does not deny death. It just says that death isn't the end of the story. Resurrection doesn't claim that we have not undergone tremendous damage. Many of our dreams have been shattered, our courage can fail us, and we get discouraged along the way. But the concept of resurrection implies that we are on a journey. On this journey a rather powerful transformation is occurring. A truth and a reality and a love (greater than we can possibly imagine) is calling us forward. No matter our personal limitations, flaws or handicaps, no matter our national and global challenges, we are invited to travel on a meaningful and essential journey. If you think this is a bold aspiration, you are correct. Consider a Sufi story of a certain small mosquito.

The mosquito is hanging its head low, with a hundred sorrows and rejections.

A passerby asks, "What is your wish, O tiny creature?"

And the mosquito replies, "That all the water of this entire ocean would be mine. I want to drink this whole ocean."

The man said, "Since you have no capacity, you would do well to know your place. Such foolish thoughts make no sense!"

The lover mosquito answered, "How can I give up this longing to such hopelessness? A thousand times a day my clever mind quits me, but not for a single breath will this Love abandon me. Look not at my stature or my lack of worth. Pay attention to where this great desire comes from." (Adapted from *Winds of Grace* by Vraje Abramim, Pg. 198)

The great world religious traditions proclaim that our human longing for home, for joy, for freedom and peace is not a foolish fantasy. Rather, it is one of God's greatest gifts, offering fairly impressive proof that we are loved and that we are being called. Rumi said that our hunger is all the proof we should need for the existence of bread. Our thirst is proof of the existence of water.

There are two significant stories told in the Bible about resurrection. One, in the Hebrew scripture has the prophet Ezekiel bringing dry bones back to life. And in the gospels we have a lost son being found and coming alive again. The Ezekiel story concerns a prophet. Just so you know, the word *prophet* actually never meant *one who can foretell the future*. It meant *one who speaks on behalf of another*. In this case, Ezekiel was willing to speak on behalf of God.

In this story, God is talking to Ezekiel and shows to his prophet a valley of dry human bones. The Lord suggests that Ezekiel bring them back to life. Ezekiel agrees that the breath of God (the spirit of the holy) is powerful enough to raise up the bones and re-animate them with muscle and skin and breath.

Although I imagine that if the bones could have registered their opinion, they might have said, "Give me a break! It should be fairly obvious to you that we are an army that lost! We were defeated, forsaken and forgotten. We have been run over. We were devastated and completely abandoned. Please leave us to lie in this God-forsaken valley."

But Ezekiel, speaking on behalf of God, gathers the wind from the four corners of the world, and breathes life back into those who were slain. Scripture reports that there was noise, and shaking and a coming together of the bones. Eventually the great army was standing up on their own feet and taking in air.

What I love best about this story is that then, God quite literally proclaimed, loudly, "This is a metaphor!" He said, I am speaking to you as individuals, and to you as a community. Even when our bones feel dead, and our hope is lost and when we believe that we are utterly cut off from our fondest dreams, the Lord said, "I will open your graves, and bring you back to life. I shall ignite my spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own home."

We had a guest Rabbi, who came to preach here at my invitation when I was in active ministry at First Unitarian. His name was Rabbi Baruch Goldstein. He had a tattooed number on his arm. He was a Holocaust survivor, who as a teenager had seen his parents and family murdered in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. When he was released from the death camps in 1945, he told me that he was dead. For all practical purposes he had no hope. No faith. He said that it was the love of his wife to be that breathed new life into him. And slowly and slowly, his faith returned and he became a Conservative Rabbi. But what astonished me was when he said that his restoration was not complete until he came to Worcester, where he found he was fully accepted and affirmed by his Christian colleagues. Preaching in this pulpit had something to do with his ongoing journey to resurrection. The communities we participate in, the relationships we nurture, and the service we offer contributes to our healing and wholeness.

That is why I believe in resurrection. I have seen it. I know it is possible. But then, like Prodigal Sons, we forget. The Prodigal Son is the only parable Jesus tells about

resurrection. As a story it is a powerful description of what our own journeys may be like. First, the youngest son wishes his father dead. (That is what it meant in ancient times to ask for one's inheritance before your parents died.) I am certain that the world appeared to be that son's oyster; he was rich, young, omniscient and in control. Then came the riotous living and the famine, which left him impoverished, starving and homeless.

What is surprising, as the story is given, is that he also suffered from a deep spiritual amnesia. He has forgotten that his father loves him. He has forgotten that he has a home. He has forgotten the abundance and the unconditional forgiveness that are his birthright. His only expectation is to hope for a few crumbs from his father's table. The only welcome he can imagine is one where he is condemned as a sinner, declared unworthy, disinherited and thrown into permanent exile as a hired servant.

The prodigal son's resurrection began as he turned in the direction of his loving father. But as he trudged homeward he wasn't skipping with anticipation and delight. He had to undergo a humbling, exhausting and gut-wrenching repentance. This journey took him from a pig-sty all the way to his father's embrace. Then, and only then, was the lost one found, and the dead one come back to life.

The journey is mysterious. A few more lines from the same poem by T.S. Eliot.

*If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from, It would be the same at the end of the
journey,
If you came at night like a broken king,
If you came by day not knowing what you came for,
It would be the same, when you leave the rough road
And turn behind the pig-sty to the dull facade
And the tombstone.*

*You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.*

The road to resurrection will be different for each of us. Some will literally kneel and pray. Others will write letters to their representatives in Congress. Some will make meals for the homeless, or donate food for the hungry. Some will care for a child or for an elderly neighbor. There are a limitless number of ways we human beings work to become whole and complete.

But we have to do something. We have to act, not just react. We have to get up from whatever comfortable gravesite we have been residing in and see that there is a future. We need to see that we are being called into something larger and more

wonderful than we can now envision. Thomas Merton, my favorite monk, says it rather well...if we are only re-acting to what life throws at us, we are simply behaving like a “sentient billiard ball.”

Instead, we are called to choose the direction we go and to move forward. We are to try, everyday, in whatever way we can, to stay focused on what is best in us and what is life giving. We must summon the courage to fight the battles that we are called to fight, working to bring some decency to our world. If this sounds like a lot of hard work, requiring enormous determination and faith and effort, let me assure you that you are right. The road to resurrection is neither easy nor smooth. But I was struck recently by a speech I heard in a recording at the Kennedy Space Center. The voice was that of (then) President John F. Kennedy. He said, *“We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win...”*

We move forward to what is real and true and life giving, not because it is easy, but because it is hard. This journey is meant to focus the best of our energies and all of our skills, talents and strengths. We are asked to accept the challenge. We are unwilling to postpone the journey. (Or to experience it only as a sentient billiard ball.) And we are determined to win.

One has to ask, in the current political climate, isn't winning perhaps a bridge too far? Aren't the forces of intolerance and hatred and self-righteousness and fearfulness too powerful for love to prevail? Aren't the cards already stacked so completely against the poor and the immigrant and the vulnerable that no real relief is possible? Aren't the forces of selfishness and greed and corruption too well entrenched to ever be overthrown?

History tells us otherwise. History tells us that no matter how terrible the oppression, or how long the road, there is always a way home. There is always a way for decency, courage and hope to come back alive. Even when the circumstances of our lives all seem to be aligned to make us forget that we are cherished, valued and cared for, we can move forward on this journey.

At least that is what I have learned from the African American theologian, Howard Thurman, who was one Dr. Martin Luther King's most important spiritual mentors. In Thurman's essay on the *Sorrow Songs*, (*The African American Spirituals*); he observed that these hymns were written in the worst of times under the terrible harsh lash of slavery. This music, Thurman wrote, “speaks not only to those who faced the horrors of slavery, but also more universally, to all of us who face the threat of death.” He said, “Freedom can only mean the possibility of release from the tyranny of seceding intervals of events.” (*The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, 1947)

What the songs of that enslaved African American community bore witness to was that they were on a journey. The particular abomination of slavery was not the end of their story. Slavery was an atrocity they encountered along the way. Yet what they knew, what they believed in their hearts, minds and souls was that they were destined for freedom, for emancipation, for liberation. As Thurman wrote, "They knew that God was not done with them, that God was not done with life. God had not exhausted his resources...the human spirit can triumph over the most radical frustration! This is no ordinary achievement...In the presence of an infinite desperation, out of the very depth of life, an infinite energy took shape on their behalf."

Critics questioned Thurman, asking, "Didn't the slaves faith in God and heaven and a way home make them escapist, passive, resigned?" To which he replied, No. "To the contrary, it gave their minds a new dimension of resourcefulness. It affirmed the ultimate significance of life on earth. And heaven was a place where the slave was counted in...a place of complete freedom, a place of restoration and respect." As Thurman wrote so eloquently, " Whatever may be the pressures to which one is subjugated, the snares, the buffeting, one must not, for a moment, think that there is no ultimate value always at stake."

The restoration of human worth and dignity, this is a road worth traveling. "*That promised land, where all is peace.*" It sounds real and true to me. My hope is that all of us will find our own road to peace and to love. There is no question that we will have to travel on some rough terrain and cross over some deep rivers. Along the way we might even forget that we have a home, and that we are loved unconditionally and forgiven unconditionally.

For now, all we have to do is to keep going. In the words of the poet, T.S. Eliot,

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling ,

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started*

And know the place for the first time.

(The Choir concludes the sermon with a singing of the Spiritual, *Deep River*)

*Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground.
Deep river, my home is over Jordan*

*Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground.
Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?
Oh deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into camp-ground.*