

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/18/07**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Text: Luke 15:11-32**

It's good to be back at St. A's. I've missed you! It's hard to believe that it's been almost a year since my last Sunday here as your Interim Pastor. The months of my sabbatical have flown by. We've sold our house in Briarcliff and moved to a townhouse in Ossining, and though I was sure that we would have completed our anticipated renovations by now, we haven't even started. I think we're on draft #82 of the architect's drawings.

Larry and I have had the opportunity to travel. We were in Tokyo, where I officiated at a wedding, in which half of the liturgy was in Japanese. We've visited Nicaragua and Guatemala to see, first-hand, the effects of micro-lending in the poorest areas of Managua and Guatemala City. We've been to Chicago and Ithaca a few times to visit our sons.

And with that time off, and with the perspective that comes with travel, I've had a chance to think and pray about my life and ministry, considering my gifts, temperament, and passions. I'm trying to make some very intentional decisions about how to live a more balanced life and about how to live out my vocation joyfully. Over time, I look forward to sharing more about that.

I've also had more time to read. I'm in the middle of Barack Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, and a paragraph that he wrote in that book has given me a new lens through which to look at today's reading from Luke's Gospel.

The parable of The Prodigal Son may be the most well-known of Jesus' parables, or at least tied for first place with The Good Samaritan. This story has so much to teach us about God, about the kingdom of God, and about ourselves. A quick look at the context helps us understand what Luke's intention might have been when he included the story in this particular place in his Gospel.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke begins with these words: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' "

And then, says Luke, Jesus tells them three parables, each of which have to do with something or someone lost being found, resulting in celebration. One lost sheep is so important that ninety-nine others are left as that one is searched for and found. One of ten silver coins is misplaced, and when it is recovered, there is rejoicing. The parable of The Prodigal Son is the third of those lost and found stories. It seems that Luke's purpose in using this literary structure is to justify Jesus' unusual choice to be in relationship with those considered outcasts in his time and place. Jesus' practice of eating with people who have been refused a place at the table celebrates the return of the lost, the inclusion of the marginalized.

Focusing on today's text, we find that there's so much in this story to consider and to which we can personally relate - our restlessness with that which is familiar and secure, and the allure of the new and potentially dangerous; the consequences of living recklessly; the clarity of that "aha" moment of awareness when, as the text says the younger son did, we "come to ourselves;" the transforming power of unconditional love.

But the aspect of the story that I'd like us to consider today is the alienation between the brothers. The younger brother demands his share of the family property when it suits him. He walks away from his responsibility at home, apparently having not the least concern for how his choices might impact those he's left behind. When the younger son "comes to himself" and returns home with his prepared penitential speech, he hasn't thought to include his brother in the list of those he has wronged.

It seems that growing resentment has filled the heart of the older brother during the absence of the younger. The text doesn't say how the older brother feels about his younger brother's sudden return. But it does tell us that he explodes in anger when he hears about the lavish party being thrown to celebrate the homecoming. It's not fair - isn't he the one who deserves the costly party? As he voices his outrage to his father, the older son pointedly refers to his brother as "this son of yours" (not "this brother of mine") "who has devoured your property."

It seems that each of these brothers believes that he has the right to determine the use of the family's resources without regard for the other.

The character in this story who transcends the alienation that has otherwise enveloped the family is the father, who represents God. Like God, the father seeks relationship with each of his sons, even when they reject that relationship. The father's love and forgiveness, like God's, are wildly extravagant and without limit. Like God, the father has provided so fully for both of his sons that there's plenty to go around. Isn't it heartbreaking, then, to imagine the father's sorrow at the estrangement between his sons, after all that the father has done for each of them? The father's intention, like God's intention, is that everyone should be at the table, enjoying the banquet that has been provided for them all.

Here's where Barack Obama's book comes in. He has written: "We wouldn't tolerate schools that don't teach, that are chronically under funded and understaffed and under inspired, if we thought that the children in them were like our children. It's hard to imagine the CEO of a company giving himself a multimillion-dollar bonus while cutting health-care coverage for his workers if he thought they were in some sense his equals. And it's safe to assume that those in power would think longer and harder about launching a war if they envisioned their own sons and daughters in harm's way. I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggles are our own. If we fail to help, we diminish ourselves."

Isn't that true for us as Christians? Responding to God's gracious invitation to be in relationship with God, and taking our place at God's banquet table puts us in relationship with all the others of the family of God, whose assigned seats at the table are right next to ours. If we honestly recognized the hungry and the homeless of this world as children of God and, therefore, our own beloved sisters and brothers, wouldn't we do all within our power to make sure that they received their share of God's inheritance?

God's love and forgiveness are extravagant and boundless. The resources with which God has blessed this vast earthly family are abundant. There's more than enough to go around, but only if those of us who have access to so much share generously with those who have so little, so that all have enough.

As individuals, as families, and as a community of faith, we must wrestle, every day, with how to make sure that all have enough. There are no easy answers. How can Larry and I justify extensive renovations on our home when others have no shelter at all? Should we forego the renovations, or scale down significantly, and give more? Should we renovate as planned, but make a guest room readily available for someone in need? Should we designate a Saturday a month when we work on building a home in the area with Habitat for Humanity? The questions are hard, but we need to continue to engage them.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said that the only way to work out our relationship with God is to work out our relationship with each other. And working out our relationship with each other must include making sure that our brothers and sisters, near and far, have enough, because we have more than enough. We have so much more than enough.

Imagine the celebration when all are able to sit at the table and receive their share of the abundance of the resources given by God and intended for all. Isn't that what the kingdom of God is about? Consider our opportunity and our calling to make that a reality. Isn't that what it means for us to take our place in the kingdom of God? Amen.