

A Family Thanksgiving

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Sunday, October 12, 2008

READING: *The Prodigal Daughter* (based on Luke XV, 11-32)

Once upon a time a mother had two children. The youngest one was a girl and one morning she had an argument with her mom and she decided to run away from home. She told her mom she was going; she said, *"I don't like it here any longer. I'm going to go somewhere where it's more fun and no-one makes me pick up my things and mind my manners and turn off the T.V."* Her mother knew it was no good trying to stop her. So she gave her some money for a cheeseburger and two bus tickets and helped her pack some clothes into a bag and kissed her and said goodbye, be safe. And the girl got on a bus and went to the next town, where one of her school friends lived. And that afternoon, she and her friend went to a funfair, and she spent the cheeseburger money on cotton candy and 7-Up and had a really good time.

When it began to get dark, she asked her friend if she could stay with her that night but her friend said no, because there was company coming and in fact she had to go home right now. The girl didn't know anyone else in that town, and it was beginning to get cold and she was starting to be very hungry because cotton candy doesn't really fill you up for long. She decided to get a bus back to her own town and then see if she could find a friend there to stay with.

It was a long time before a bus came and it was quite dark now and she was tired as well as cold and hungry. It seemed to take forever to get to her town, but finally the bus turned into the street where her cousin lived and she decided to get off there and go to her cousin's house. But when she walked up the driveway to her cousin's house, she saw that there were no lights in the window, and no-one answered when she rang the bell. There was no-one home! Now what should she do? She started to cry. Then she thought, *"I'll just have to walk all the way back to my own house. It's about twenty blocks from here but at least I know the way. Oh, how I wish I'd never left. I bet my brother's eaten all the lasagna that Mom made for supper, and I bet he's borrowed all my best things and broken them, and he's probably watching his favourite show on T.V. I wish I could be home right now, even if all the food that's left is mushrooms!"* And she started walking home, crying and sniffing and wishing she'd remembered to bring some Kleenex. It seemed as if her legs were too tired to move, but she forced herself to keep walking.

When she finally turned the corner onto the street where she lived, she had such a surprise! There on the sidewalk outside the house, looking out for her, was her mother! And right away, as soon as she saw her, her mother ran towards her and hugged her and kissed her, and the girl said *"I'm sorry I ran away"*, and her mother took her into the house and brought her a whole pizza with everything on it, which she liked even better than lasagna, and wrapped her in a blanket and let her sit on the sofa to eat, which she wasn't usually allowed to do. It felt so good!

Now just as she'd thought, her older brother was home watching T.V. in another room, and when he heard all the commotion he came into the living room and said, *"It's not fair. Why are you making such a big fuss over her when you're not doing anything special for me? I stayed here*

like I was supposed to; I didn't run away like her." But their mother said, "Son, that's true, but you've been having a good time here while your sister was out in the cold and dark with nothing to eat. I've been so worried about her, and now she's back. It's always worth celebrating when someone who's been away comes home."

SERMON:

Unitarian Universalists question almost everything, especially dogma and values, but there are some things even we take for granted. One of these is the importance, even the sacredness, of the family. We're open to many different understandings of family -- single parent, same sex, extended, nuclear, blended, reconstituted, whatever -- but the idea that people of varying ages and stages of life should form a living unit together and try to accommodate and care for one another seems self-evidently good to most of us. During the fifteen years I lived alone, not in a family, I found it a perfectly good way to live, but my underlying sense of "family value" means that I looked for family substitutes or some other form of family outside and beyond my place of residence. I stressed my connections with my children in Ontario and Alberta, my relatives in England, my good friends in various places, and the church of which I was a member. I lived alone, for census purposes, but I thought of myself as living in a family for the purpose of mental and spiritual health. In my value-system, family is precious, and lack of family is sad.

Once upon a time, when I was Board President of this very congregation (this is going back a long way!), I was involved in planning the Annual Meeting of the UUA's St. Lawrence District. It had been decided that the theme of the conference would be the intergenerational experience, of which the best-known example is family life. The planning committee engaged in a lot of discussion about how best to carry out this theme -- how we would arrange activities for all ages, welcome young people but avoid the problems often associated with youth conferences, make sure that the needs of the elderly were not forgotten, and so on. Then, not too long before the conference date, some most disconcerting questions popped up. *"Why do we like the intergenerational idea? Why would we want to talk about the church as a family? We've taken it for granted, but why?"*

Well, if there's one thing we know as Unitarian Universalists it's that you never squash your own or anyone else's questions. As a Catholic or a Baptist or a Marxist-Leninist or a Republican I might have been able to answer *"Because that's part of our teaching, an article of*

faith", but as a Unitarian Universalist all I could think of to say was, "*That's a good question.*" (Typical!) I knew it was something I needed to think about, hard, for myself, before I could feel totally comfortable with the theme.

My thoughts were affected quite a bit by an exciting process which was taking place in this Hamilton congregation, the process of deciding to move to a new building, from Aberdeen Avenue to Locke Street. Participating in that experience was illuminating for me. I'd only been involved in the purchase of two buildings before that -- a family house and a family cottage -- and this was **so similar!** The things we were asking ourselves as a congregation were the same ones I'd been concerned with when buying a home twenty years earlier: were there enough rooms for the kids? where would we put our furniture? was there space for parties and entertaining? was the kitchen bright and cheerful and efficient? could we arrange some sound-proofing between the children and the grown-ups? would the place still be big enough when the family grew? and, of course, could **we afford it?** The congregation apparently **was** a family, in this process, anyway -- or at least it acted like one, complete with miscommunication, varying degrees of enthusiasm, and something very much like sibling rivalry!

Over the years since then I've been reminded of that similarity as I've been through various housing transitions, both personally and in church life. One of my daughters was quite angry with me about the sale of the home in Ancaster in which I had spent nearly 25 years and where she grew up; she wanted things to stay the same for ever, and I understand that very well though I know it's impossible. My other two daughters had mixed feelings too, and I shared them. At a church in which I was a beginning minister for a couple of years later on, the hurts and resentments which went with selling the building 10 years earlier, along with the need to adapt and move on, were still part of the family feeling in the congregation, and probably linger to this day.

Perhaps those experiences provide a little bit of the answer to the question about why we value the family-like aspects of our communal life. We value them because they come rather naturally to us. They seem like the way things were meant to be. Acting like a family is comfortable and, in its most literal sense, **familiar**, even if it was sometimes far from ideal in our other experiences. But the appeal to tradition and familiarity and the conservative spirit is not one which usually carries great or decisive weight among Unitarian Universalists, and I think we need to find a more compelling justification, eventually, for likening the church to a family.

It may help if we look at the alternatives to family life, some of which have considerable appeal.

I can vouch for the fact that living alone has much to recommend it. Freedom, independence, and knowing that when you've cleaned up the clutter it's quite possible that it'll stay cleaned up for more than five minutes, which is amazing. And the religious equivalent of the single life is perfectly possible. One can be a reflective, seeking, spiritual human being in solitude. But by joining a congregation, we say that we're looking for **community**. The church, by its very nature, is about togetherness, not apartness; it's a group, not just a number of individuals. In a church, we can **never** be sure that things will stay put!

There are other sorts of community besides the family, of course. There are single-sex organizations, and places like student residences where everyone's the same age, and retirement villages, and clubs for special interests, and institutions of various kinds. Each of them is restrictive or exclusive in some way. I suggest that one of the reasons we value the family kind of community is that, at its best (**and of course it isn't always at its best; it's often inadequate and sometimes downright abusive**) -- at its **best**, it's the kind of community that gives us each the most freedom to be. You don't get excluded from a decent family for being too old or too young, the wrong sex, not a good enough hockey player or not an opera fan. You may get criticized and dumped on for any of those things, but you don't get turned out. That's a wonderfully comforting, strengthening thing, and congregational gatherings, which are so often like family reunions, are comforting, strengthening experiences. One of the world's best stories about this, from my favourite source-book, is the story of the Prodigal Son, which I adapted a little into the form you heard earlier in the service. The end of that story is probably the most important part, and here's how it goes in the Gospel according to Luke, at the point where the Prodigal has returned to a wonderful welcome:

Now the elder son was out on the farm; and on his way back, as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. The servant told him,

"Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound."

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him; but he retorted,

"You know how I have slaved for you all these years; I never once disobeyed your orders; and you never gave me a feast with my friends. But now that this son of yours turns up, after running through your money with his women, you kill the fatted calf for him."

"My boy," *said the father*, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **How could we help celebrating this happy day? Your brother here was dead and has come back to life, was lost and is found.**"

I don't think Jesus will ever lose his reputation as a great teacher, if only because he told stories like that.

It may have occurred to you that in one important respect we're **not** like a family: sisters and brothers don't choose one another, and we have chosen this family, at least in general, though we may not have chosen each person in it. Perhaps it's a bit more like the family that's acquired by marriage -- we choose our spouse, but whether we like it or not we get involved with all their relatives too. By the fact of marriage, they become our relatives, no matter how difficult they are to get along with, no matter how much we disapprove of them or find them alien to us. As far as the Church is concerned -- well, we wanted to become members, but there were people we'd have much preferred not to be associated with, people who live very different lives from ours, whose beliefs seem definitely less enlightened -- or perhaps they're a bit embarrassing with their physical or mental or emotional peculiarities. If this really is a family, then they're our relatives, we're stuck with them. You know how awkward it can be when someone says, "*You're Prudence Zaraplinski, eh? Any relation to Ed Zaraplinski?*" and we have to confess that yes, poor silly old Ed is our cousin. Well, it happens in the congregational family, too. People say, "*Unitarian, eh I knew a Unitarian once, and let me tell you about her!*" It can make one blush, but we have to say that yes, she's part of the family.

Of course, it works wonderfully in the opposite way, too. In the 30 years I've been a Unitarian Universalist I've been enormously proud to claim kinship with some marvellous people in the local congregations and at the international level of the movement, past and present. By joining a liberal religious community, I've acquired relatives all over the world, connections I'd never have been lucky enough to have in any other way. And I can count on the fact that because they and I are UUs, we're committed to respecting each other and caring about each other. The name of our movement, Unitarian Universalist, the family name, has come to mean that: respect for others and respect for truth.

Each person in a UU congregation matters, no member is of no account, no child or adult is dispensable, because each one is our relative -- not only through being human but also by being

a member of our congregational family and the liberal religious movement. I know two sisters who married two brothers. Their children are kind of double cousins, and I think that's what we UU's are to each other! Part of the human family; part of this liberal religious family; doubly related. I'm so thankful for that relationship.

Soon after I became a Unitarian Universalist, in this congregation, I heard someone say that the best organizations are those which are harder to get into than to get out of. I think it was cults like the Moonies which were under discussion at the time -- groups which entice young people in and then make it very difficult for them to leave. It made me wonder how we can balance our eagerness to welcome newcomers with an understanding that becoming a member is serious business. But the other part of it, the leaving part, may be even more important, and I think family life provides a good example.

As members of a family, as parents, anyway, we don't really expect that our children will stay around for ever and ever. Oh, we may put some pressure on them to keep coming home for Thanksgiving and similar occasions -- weddings and funerals and so on -- but we don't think they'll necessarily live at home, or even nearby, all their lives. It's the same with our congregational children. If we really believe in our religious education -- that's it's educating our children to make their own choices and decisions about religion -- then we needn't be surprised or discouraged when some of them decide to become Seventh Day Adventists or Hare Krishna devotees or non-churchgoers. We've taught them to decide for themselves, and they do!

So it is with the adult congregation, too. If our members decide at any age or stage that it's time to move on to another religious affiliation, or at least out of this one, I don't believe we need to feel that either we or they have failed. We may suffer some hurt at their loss, but I hope that when we've adjusted we can wish them well and rejoice in the fact that they take a bit of Unitarian Universalism with them wherever they go. Because that's what the congregational family is about. Not keeping people at home but preparing them to move on. Not insisting that they spend every Sunday with us, but providing a home that they can come back to any time. Not tying people with the bonds of contract or obligation but with the bonds of affection and memory and **thanks-giving**.

I don't plan to leave Unitarian Universalism for a long time, if ever, but if and when I do I know it will stay part of me for ever. And I'll know I can always come back to the family, to

visit or to stay, because there's a sense in which I'll always belong, in the same sense that I'll always be a sister to my sister. I give thanks for this -- and it's true for you, too!

In the wonderful stories by A.A.Milne, Winnie the Pooh (the "*bear with very little brain*"), knew how this works in practice -- here's an incident which I think happened after an adventure with rebuilding Eeyore's house when a strong wind had transported it:

Christopher Robin had a question to ask, and he was wondering how to ask it.

"Well", *he said at last*, "... [I]f your own house is blown down you must go somewhere else, mustn't you, Piglet? What would **you** do if your house was blown down?"

Before Piglet could think, Pooh answered for him.

"He'd come and live with me", *said Pooh*. "Wouldn't you, Piglet?"

Piglet squeezed his paw.

"Thank you, Pooh", *he said*. "I should love to".

And that, I think, is just another way of saying, in those wonderful words of Robert Frost,

"Home is the place where when you have to go there they have to take you in."

I'm glad there's this home, this church, this family, for us. I hope it feels good to you, too. Let us give thanks!