

“A Parable of Madness”

Luke 15:11-32

Part IV of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

August 18, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio at Corinthians Baptist Church on Saturday, August 17, 2024 and at First Congregational Church on Sunday, August 18, 2024 dedicated to the memory of Natalie Duncan, to all who are brave and courageous in their daily witness for their family members in the battle with mental illness, to Pastor Michael Reeves, the people of Corinthian Baptist, and the members and friends of First Church and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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The Story of the Prodigal Son. We know this story – right? At least we assume we know it. Just we assume we know the family living next door to us or our own family for that matter. But stories we believe we know, and love are often left un-prodded, unchallenged and uninteresting. The Same could be true for our families, too. Let’s take another look at this family – and ours.

On the surface, Jesus tells this story about a father and his two sons.

The older son knows how the world works. He is a classic oldest child – begins life with rookie parents who make rookie mistakes. As an oldest son, he has to push against the limits. He has to learn how to work and grow up

much faster. He is dutiful, hardworking and loyal to his father. We think we know him.

The younger son knows how to work the world. He, like other younger children, inherits parents who are veterans (actually we hear nothing of the mother here). But certainly, his father is a veteran parent. Like a veteran, dad is somewhat tired by the work of parenting. This old-timer has relaxed quite a bit. The youngest child is inheriting a dad who is going through the parenting process for the last time. This is the last child to call him “daddy.” This is the last child who will learn to walk, talk, read and of course, push parental buttons. Younger children learn to play their parents like a fiddle. And they are good at it. In this story, the younger son is a master fiddler (Richard Swanson in *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2006, pp. 128-130).

The master fiddler is hardly working in this story – except to work his daddy. He goes to his father and somehow convinces him that it is a good idea that they pretend together that the father was dead so that the son could fictively inherit his share of the property. Let’s be honest - that was the only way this story could work. With a percentage of the farm sold off, the younger son takes off to spend his father’s hard-earned inheritance. It isn’t long before the younger son has blown all his inheritance on wild adventures in a far-away land. It says, “*he came to himself*” or many translations say, “*he came to his senses.*”

This is where we need to do a freeze frame on this story. Stop right here. Let’s look more closely. On the surface, I have always thought I understood this story perfectly well. But, when I came to this passage, considering the family dynamics of mental illness, these words jumped off the page of the Bible. So, I raise the question for you – is it possible that the younger son has some sort of Brain disease? We can all admit that his behaviors are compulsive – right? A person doesn’t beg for, cajole and force the hand of a parent for half their value while they are still living, then get it, and go and blow it

immediately without something being wrong in their mind? Right? **This is NOT NORMAL BEHAVIOR. Can we all at least agree on that?**

One of the problems in dealing firsthand with mental illness is that – for both the person with an illness and the people in the family around them – there is often a continued ramping-up of behaviors. The adult son who pushes his father to give up half the farm has (in this interpretation) pushed his father throughout his lifetime about lots of things – including family rules, household chores, going to church (or synagogue), going to school, and of course – money. He pushes and pushes and pushes until his father gives in from a lifetime of pressure. Through it all, it isn't that he his "bad" (which his brother keeps saying). Rather, he is sick.

A friend of mine experienced her father going through the end stages of cancer and found that the disease changed his behaviors, and it changed his brain chemistry. And chemo and radiation and the disease itself made him say things and do things that didn't fit the dad she had known throughout her lifetime. In time, she was able to forgive the behavior because of the disease's effects on her dad. When cancer changes or intensifies a person's behaviors, we are able to forgive and move on. When the brain disorders and diseases do the same to our loved ones, it is much harder to move on – even though the same grace extended to one disease needs to be extended to the other, too.

I don't know about you – but I tend to focus on the behaviors – because I often don't have words or thorough medical analysis to name the actions and thus forgive them. Erratic behaviors related to mental illness haunt the circle of loved ones who wonder – could we have said something different? Done something different? Responded better or sooner? Reacting to things will make you crazy. You find yourself hiding things, saying things, lying about things (for the first time in your life), doing things you never imagined possible – even giving away half your farm to a child who has not demonstrated in any way that he is stable enough to manage the money he is giving him.

All of this is crazy, and “Crazy making” (as I say) and is directly related to “crazy in the blood.” In her book, *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness, Family and Church*, Sarah Griffith Lund opens her book by defining “Crazy” and “Crazy in the Blood.” “Crazy” is a slang word that describes a person with brain disease and a description of a situation that is out of our control. “*Crazy in the Blood*” is a phrase that describes a genetic predisposition to suffering from a brain disease and is the reason some families are more dysfunctional than others.

She says: “*Bipolar tends to run in families and appears to have a genetic link. Like depression and other serious illnesses, bipolar disorder can also negatively affect spouses, partners, family members, friends and co-workers*” (*Blessed Are the Crazy*, Sarah G. Lund, Chalice Press, St, Louis, MO, 2014, p. v).

I would like for us to see the younger son as sick and for once in our lives not simply see him as “bad.” He is crazy – to quote Sarah Lund. He may be suffering from bi-polar disease. He may be afflicted with psychosis or suffering from some form of schizophrenia. He may have multiple diagnoses. We don’t know. It was the first century not the 21st Century when Jesus told this story. Nobody had a diagnosis back then. None of these words were in existence. People like the younger son were called hateful names like wasteful, wayward, evil, sinful and a shame on the family name. **But when we look closely, we see a young man who is not well.**

There is he is wallowing with the pigs, eating the food of pigs (from the perspective of a religious Jew – this is lower than low). Lying in the pigsty the youngest son wakes up. The clouds part in his brain and “he comes to his senses.” For a moment, he sees his true condition. He has nothing. He has hit rock bottom. For a moment in time, he realizes how low he has fallen. There in the stinking, sinking mud of the pigsty he talks to himself. He works out the words that he is going to say to his dad. “*I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am not worthy to be called your son.*” He rehearses this all the way home. Like a mantra of madness, seeking to find home, he walks by himself, and he talks to himself.

Like all the parents who have struggled through their children's brain diseases, the father is waiting for his son. His daily prayer is that the boy is still alive. As bad as his behaviors may have become, as often as the father has had thoughts he had to suppress about his son which he hates himself for having, he waits. Every night he goes to the edge of his property and watches as the sun goes down to catch a glimpse of his son in the darkness at the edge of town. Every morning, he arises – as if he had been sleeping – to watch. He waits for his return.

Like this father, my daughter ran away when she suffered as a teen. Any parent whose child has left home in distress or runs away from home has the same sick and sinking feeling in their hearts. Is she alive? Is someone out there caring for her? Is she dead in a ditch? Is he in a homeless shelter? Or has he found happiness and a sense of sanity? Has he found a home – somewhere? Anywhere? Did some other woman or man look into his eyes or her eyes and see the hurt child that I see? And the wondering turns into a prayer – with the same depth of anguish and concern. And the prayers are lamenting prayers. They are grieving, painful prayers – just like the prayers you'd have if this has happened to you. The prayers are wailing cries to God for help. I have prayed these prayers. I know what they sound and feel like.

Finally, the son reaches what's left of the family farm. His father sees him first and runs to his side. The son has been muttering under his breath the whole way home, he begins to speak – but gets only half of what he wants to say out of his mouth before his father declares in a totally unrehearsed way to all those who can hear: *“Quick! Dress him with a robe, a ring for his finger and sandals. Get the fattened calf and kill it and we will have a celebration feast because my lost son who was dead has come back to life! He was lost and is found!”*

Let the party begin! Grace abounds! Love is spoken. **Not so fast. Stop everything.** Before we get too excited about the party, let's remember the father has an older son, too. The older son comes home from yet another hard day's work and hears the music playing and smells the unfamiliar, but

glorious smell of beef cooking, and he asks one of the servants what is going on. (Which one of us would want to be THAT servant?) “*Your brother has come home, so your dad is throwing a party!*” Big brother shares no delight in the return of little brother. His brain fills with visions, too. All he can see, and smell, and hear is a future of a smaller estate, harder work, sale of more of his future inheritance for his mentally ill brother.

In every family, some are blessed not to be “as crazy” in the blood. Big brother might have gotten the genes that didn’t make his mind muddled and his behaviors erratic. It is hard to watch his brother come back and the cycle start again. Compassion is in the big brother – but it is buried really deep. He has witnessed the pain caused to his dad and he has felt the pain, too. He sees his brother now living off his inheritance. And he sees his father being played once again.

Big brother has reached the end of his rope. Baby brother has come home, not to penance, but to privilege. It’s bad enough that he has wasted fathers’ estate, but he isn’t required to change any of his actions for all the pain he has created.

One has to wonder – Is it possible he left in the first place because he couldn’t watch his successful brother get up and be normal every day? But that is not a question to ask Big Brother.... When the older son confronts his dad, the father listens to everything he screams. Unlike his younger brother who has rehearsed all his words there is nothing rehearsed in big brother’s explosion (although he must have thought these words inside his head a million times). He lets it all hang out. The dutiful son, the loyal son, the obedient son – loses it! He has been good. He has followed orders. He has been faithful. He has done everything right – as opposed to everything wrong.

And dad takes it all in. He has no angry response. He has no lecture about honoring your father. He has lost his younger son to the afflictions of the brain and misbehaviors of waste and recklessness. Now he is watching his older son getting lost to anger and self-righteousness. The father simply loves

his oldest son in return. He says, *“son, you are always with me. Everything I have is yours . . . but your brother was dead and is alive, he was lost and has been found.”*

Grace abounds for the father of these two sons. He finds a way to speak to each son. Reading the texts through the lens of brain diseases and family systems helps us see that when one out of five people in a family system is afflicted with a brain disease, the other four family members are affected. These may be our children, but they are also the siblings of our other children.

I have also witnessed that sometimes parents forsake the child with a brain disease and circle the wagons around the other children. I have seen denial of the diseases and disturbing amounts of rejection for the children in need. While that may surprise some of you, it speaks deeply to the difficulties of admitting there are brain diseases in our family systems – “there is crazy in the blood.” There are other times when the child who appears to be well and healthy runs away and does a shift geographically from the family – seeking to create a “safe distance” from the crazy in the blood. Can you see how complex brain diseases are and the effects of them on the one afflicted and the ones affected are far-reaching?

The effect of brain diseases on our children is significant. Not long ago, my friend Dr. Glenn Thomas of Nationwide Children’s Hospital sent me some sobering statistics about children and mental illness. These are sobering statistics which should grab our attention as we seek to see and understand the depth of the affect and reach of brain diseases.

- 11% of children (ages 8 to 11) have or have had a mental illness with severe impairment.
- 22% of teens (ages 13 to 18) have had a mental illness with severe impairment in their lifetime.
- Only 50% of youth with a mental health disorder receive any behavioral health treatment (some stats say fewer than 50%).

- 50% of all lifetimes mental illness start by age 14.
- 75% of all lifetimes mental illness start by age 24.

Our children need us to speak for them – because nobody else will. We need to look for them coming home. We need to run to them when they make it home. We need to embrace them and support them as best as we can – while fighting back the pain we feel getting a front row seat as they spiral.

The greatest gift we can give in the struggle to address brain diseases is to talk about this at church. To lift the stigma surrounding brain diseases, we need to do it for our children and for the kids living next door to us.

And we also need to remember that some of our children never make it home. They die on the roads and in the ditches and alone in the pigsties that “crazy” created. They end their own lives through suicide. This happened to my best friend growing up – Sammy Bloom. It happened just 16 days ago to the niece of Lori and Ben Horne – Natalie Duncan – who walked down this aisle as a flower girl at Ben and Lori’s wedding years ago. Just like the Prodigal Son, Sammy and Natalie were caught in the parable of madness. Last year alone, more than 50,000 Americans died by suicide – the most ever in our 248-year history as a nation.

But that’s not the end of the story!

In the power and presence of God’s amazing grace, we are each called to tell our stories, to welcome our loved ones home, to embrace them with love and grace and to let go and let God step into the breach. It is time to run to those who are reckless and self-righteous and those who are angry and resentful and to throw our arms around them and love them back into life! It is time. Because after all is said and done, life (and yes, eternal life as well), is all about coming home. Everything! Everything! Everything is about coming home. Amen.

