

Riverside United Church
February 9, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15: 11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

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

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

So he 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. 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.’ ”

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.” But the father said to his slaves, “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.

‘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 slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has 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 killed the fatted calf for him!”

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.” ’

Prayer of Illumination

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“What we are Meant to Do and Be: #3- To Make Music in an Old Person’s Heart”

Today would be my grandmother’s 120th birthday. She died in 1998 and I cherish her influence and memory almost everyday. In honor of her life, my mother has taken pieces of memoir that she wrote, added narrative details and collected other memories and stories and produced a book that tells her life story. It was just printed this week, so I have not yet received a copy, but I am anxious to read it in order to remember and to learn more of her life.

For the last 6 years of my grandmother’s life she lived with the effects of a stroke. She lived in a nursing home and one of her limitations was an inability to speak. She was able to communicate with body language and facial expressions. And I remember the smile on her face when she met our 3 month old daughter Ruth a few months before she died. She always seemed to know who was present with her and she seemed greatly frustrated that she could not communicate with words, because she was someone who was so interested in the lives of others and one of the things I inherited from her was her love of making connections between people.

For those years that she lived in a nursing home in Nova Scotia, I was living in Saskatchewan, so I didn’t get to see her very often. But one other memorable visit with her at the nursing home was one Sunday afternoon when I went with her to the church service held at the nursing home. I was sitting beside her and there were lots of hymns sung during the service. And at one point I realized that I could hear her and I looked over and she was singing. Her soul was singing, even when she could not talk.

I often think of that moment when I sing the phrase, “to make music in an old person’s heart.” That phrase is part of the 4th verse of Jim Strathdee’s hymn, “I am the Light of the World.” Today, and today we are continuing our Epiphany exploration of the wisdom of this hymn, as we seek to follow Jesus who used a variety of metaphors to speak of how he embodies the Holy. One of those images used was “I am the light of the world.” And as we hear those words, we know that our world needs holy light and wisdom and too often the words of Jesus are understood as Jesus being the superior way in relation to other paths of faith. But, I think it is more important that we see the way that Jesus taught as one path to Holy Truth. And if people of various paths of faith spent more time seeking to live the Holy Teachings, rather than arguing over which path was better, then we may truly be able to discover what we are meant to do and to be - not just as followers of one path, but as human beings.

Jim Strathdee’s words which are based on Howard Thurman’s poem, “The Work of Christmas” offers a variety of descriptive phrases of the work that we are to do if we are to follow the light of Jesus. So, this Epiphany series has reflected on “to heal the broken soul with love” and “to make the powerful care.” And today, we think about “to make music in an old person’s heart.”

What comes to mind with that phrase? How important is music in the heart of an older person, or a person of any age? What brings joy, and contentment, and gratitude to our hearts?

These phrases of the hymn have been paired with parables in the gospel of Luke. And parables are teaching stories of Jesus and the stories have varied layers of meaning. As I was thinking of today’s phrase, I was bringing to mind older people in scripture and wondering about the music in the heart of for instance Abraham and Sarah as they set out on the journey of promise and

covenant to a new land when they were over 90 years old. But, they aren't characters in a gospel parable.

One of the most intriguing parables that we have is the story that we heard as our reading today, the story of the father and two sons. The story is often called the prodigal Son, but the father and the older brother offer richness to the story as we may find ourselves in that story. It is a story about rebellion and resentment, squandering and generosity.

As I reflect on the story today, I am focusing more on the father since he's probably the oldest person in the story, and there is the scene near the end of the story when the younger son returns home and the father runs to greet him, to embrace him and to welcome him home. What music was known in that father's heart in that moment?

I imagine a song of deep joy, of deep gratitude, of reconciliation and peace.

There are a lot of scenarios in our world where we live in that reality of the prodigal parable where there is great distance on the path home. We live with fear of not knowing how the past resentments will be remembered. We live with guilt about what we have neglected to do or to say. The parable is not a fairy tale where happily ever after is the expectation. But, it's a story that reminds us that sometimes when we have the courage to keep bridging the gaps, to keep walking the road, there may be the open arms of grace waiting and needing to be offered.

And in those moments and experiences, the tune of the heart can be transformed.

On Thursday, a group of us from Riverside were at Landmark Court to offer the monthly United Church worship service. This sermon was percolating in my mind and so I used the service as a focus group opportunity to reflect on this phrase, "to make music in an old person's heart." I asked them if they knew any older people, and they did. I asked them what did they think or know that brought music to an old person's heart? And the responses flowed and if I had been better prepared I would have brought a pen to write them down. But the responses included: family, grandchildren, faith, memories, great-grandchildren, thoughtful neighbours, health, etc.

It's noteworthy that fame or wealth or success were not mentioned. And those are the things that our society promotes as being the key to contentment, and satisfaction and joy.

Afterwards one woman came up to me and told me that recently her whole family had gathered for her birthday and she said "it was the best day of my life!"

We live in a context where the elders of our families and communities are often not held in the respect that some other cultures offer. There are challenges of health and dementia that affect our relationships with older persons, and yet we still cherish the connections and the memories.

In many ways we are a part of a culture that ignores the needs and gifts of older people and so we are denied that gift of open arms of grace that help us to learn the wisdom of what is truly important in our lives.

One of the gifts of faith communities is that there is opportunity for inter-generational connection and relationships. We dance at a baby's new birth and make music in an old person's heart. We

nurture the sense of joy and contentment and cherish the gift of wisdom that can be shared by a variety of ages and experiences. And I hope we strive to give thanks for the full range of life as human worth and dignity is known and offered.

So we are invited to find ways to make music and to enable the music of the heart and soul to be nourished, shared and expressed.

The picture on the bulletin cover today conveys so much about inter-generational connection and love. The baby in the picture is Gwen, and Gwen is the first great great grandchild of my grandmother. In the picture she is being held by her great-grandfather as they get to know one another when she is about 6 weeks old. They live on opposite sides of North America but were together because of the death of Gwen's great grandmother (my aunt) in the fall. There is so much love offered in that picture and I would imagine that Uncle Kerwin knew a deep joy as his heart was filled with music and gratitude in that moment and in that relationship that will continue to be nourished.

On Thursday at Landmark, afterwards, some of us were discussing how the music we learn as a child affects the type or genre of music that we prefer later in our lives. For some of us, hymns and songs of faith may have been that earliest exposure to music.

When my grandmother sang a hymn that Sunday afternoon in the nursing home, she was singing from a deep memory of the heart and soul. I don't remember what hymn it was, but I do know that her favourite hymn was "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." So regardless of how old we may be, may our hearts be able to sing songs that enable us to know gratitude, peace, contentment, faith and love. Amen.