Sermon – A Time to Embrace
Scripture Readings– Genesis 33:1-10, Luke 15:11-32
Sunday, March 30, 2025
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Our first scripture is found in Genesis 33:1-10. This is the story of Jacob's homecoming and first meeting with his brother Esau. Twenty-one years had passed since Jacob deceived their father Isaac into giving him the birthright that belonged to Esau as firstborn. Jacob feared revenge from his brother but instead found favor, forgiveness and a heartfelt embrace. This is the word of God.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. 2 He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. 3 He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. 4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. 5 When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." 6 Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; 7 Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. 8 Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." 9 But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." 10 Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. Amen.

Both of our scripture readings are stories about families, homecoming, and a time to embrace. Our second is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15:11-33, where we read a familiar parable about a father's embrace of his son who has come home. Jesus shares the dilemma of his overjoyed father who loves both his sons and who longs for them to love one another. Listen to what the spirit is saying:

"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 traveled 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.' "

The title of the sermon: A Time to Embrace

Text: "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." Luke 15:20

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us a deeper understanding of how you can love each of us as if there was no other and yet love all of us. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

One of the greatest joys of my time at Westminster has been the warm embrace of the women from the Islamic Society of Springfield. Our friendship began the summer of 2016 as together we initiated the interfaith fellowship "Children of Abraham."

An Adult Education Forum Westminster hosted in January of that year was the impetus for this initiative. We invited Rabbi Marks from the Jewish community and Dr. Mostoufi from the Islamic community to join me in an interfaith dialogue reflecting on a book of essays entitled The Tent of Abraham, Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. We welcomed over 100 people from the community in Parish Hall as we highlighted each faith tradition's connection to Abraham. The Jewish community through Isaac, the Islamic community through Ishmael, and the Christian community through Jesus Christ. Together we explored the stories of Abraham to understand the patriarch at the heart of all three faiths.

Today, through Children of Abraham's quarterly gatherings, we teach love and mutual respect and build friendships across race and religion. Our theme song, "Father Abraham," affirms we are part of one family. *Father Abraham had many kids. I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord."*

In the midst of these endearing verses and in light of the time and energy so many have invested in building friendships across faith alliances, we find media stories highlighting a national leader with tattoos representing Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and Christian Nationalism so demoralizing and offensive.

Both of our scripture readings today are about conflict between siblings seeking a place within their family. In the patriarchal culture of our Bible, tradition dictated that the oldest son received the inheritance. This is the conflict between Jacob and Esau and it plays a role in the parable of the prodigal son as well. In the patriarchal culture, daughters have no birthright.

In our culture today, there is more equality and opportunity (for the most part) among siblings within a family. Yet, we each have the secret wish to be *the only* and *the most beloved* child of

our parents. Years ago, when our dad was alive, my sister Becky and I had a ritual during our weekly phone calls with him. When he asked, "Who is this?" we each replied, "It's your favorite daughter!"

My dad understood firsthand the parents' dilemma of wanting each of their children to feel special and loved and for their children to love each other—a dilemma we see in the story of the Prodigal Son. On the one hand, the parable explores the family dynamics between two brothers and a father. On the other hand, it describes the relationships among members of the Judeo-Christian tradition during the first century of the Christian era to reveal the nature of the God Jesus called father.

One theological interpretation of the story is that the "older brother" represents the ongoing Jewish community, and the "younger brother" represents the Gentile Christian community, both children of God, both living in the household of God, and both needing to recognize and affirm the other's presence and unique relationship to the father.

In this story, we see a father who is there for both his sons who are struggling to come into their own. When the younger son asks the father for his share of the inheritance to explore the unknown world beyond their home, the father does not criticize him. According to Jewish tradition, his share as the second born was one third. Birth order had already dealt him a disadvantage, and rather than stay at home in the shadow of his older brother, he moved on. Perhaps it was his naiveté that led to his bankruptcy and need to seek the mercy of his father.

Upon his return, the son is welcomed home with a loving embrace and his father begins the rituals of celebration. Any parent understands the joy and gratitude within this father's heart. However, this father not only embraces his younger son. When he gets word that his older son is angry and refuses to come in, he goes out to entreat him. Luke says he sought him earnestly.

The father understands his son's resentment and hurt feelings. Who among us cannot identify with this dutiful son's point of view, who has spent his life working by his father's side? Surely, he had dreams of exploring the world but chose to make sacrifices for his father and now he's wondering why. The father listens to his son's feelings and then gently reaffirms his love and reminds him of all they have shared over the years, something no one can take from them, not even his younger brother. Then the father tries to explain to his older son that for him to love his younger brother and rejoice in his return does not negate the love he has for his firstborn.

And so, we find in this parable, in this "gospel within the gospel," a profound understanding about the nature of God. This is not about a God who shows favoritism and elitism. This is about a patriarch who loves all his children. This, my friends, is a celebration for the whole family of God. We no longer need to seek to be the favored son or daughter. Our religion need not be competitive or elitist. In fact, this is the antithesis of who our God has been revealed to be in Jesus Christ.

Each of us has a place in our Creator's heart. There is no longer one birthright but many blessings. Nothing is more pleasing to God than a greater wideness in our mercy toward one another and a willingness to embrace our brothers and sisters who also belong to God.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept. So be it. Amen.