

## **“Living a Miserable Life Is Not a Ticket to Eternity”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for Sunday, February March 6, 2016 - Lent 4

Scripture Readings: Joshua 5:9-12

Luke 15 :1-3, 11b-32

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Let’s be clear – we are in the middle of Lent, and while I have suggested giving something up for Lent has a limited value in spiritual growth in my viewpoint, surely we can agree Lent is a time to be serious. This is not a time to be lighthearted and humorous, but a season in which we examine what the faith is, how it brings value to life, and how it is (or at least should be) part of our everyday lives.

And if we are going to take our spiritual journey seriously, then we better take seriously the story of the Prodigal Son (also known as the story of the Older Brother or the Story of the Forgiving Father, or even the story of the miserable brother, but more on that later).

If we take the story seriously, there are some basic facts that we all can identify with as a sibling or parent, maybe even as a child.

1. Parents are always parents, no matter how old their children become.
2. Children always want the support of their parents and to please their parents no matter how old they each are, or even if the parents are no longer alive.
3. Brothers always have baggage from their childhood no matter how old they become (the same can be said of sisters).
4. No matter how old an adult we are, we become like a little child again when we are around our parents more than we would like to admit.

Now taking the story seriously brings, for me, those observations. And we need to be honest enough with ourselves, and humble enough as to what we expect, to admit that these factors are alive in our lives.

But there is something that also must be said: no matter how we might feel short-changed in life, being miserable about our lot in life is never valuable or worthwhile.

For me that is the essence of the dynamic of this parable. There is the intrigue of a father throwing a party for a wasteful son who all but ruined his life. There is the latent sympathy for an older brother who did what was expected of him, kept the home fires burning, looked after the farm, and feels spurned for his loyalty. And there is a father caught in the middle of his sons, not knowing how he can do right by them both.

But at its essence, this story is not about doing the right thing – it is about doing the Godly thing, the Spirit-inspired thing. It is not about doing what is right, but doing what is faithful. To put it differently to make the point, it is not about doing what is good, but doing what is the best.

Friday at the Church of the Epiphany the World Day of Prayer Service was conducted by woman of the downtown churches in Sudbury. The service booklet itself was produced by the World Day of Prayer Committee from Cuba, and featured insights of the grandmothers of that country who spoke about the needs of children, especially children facing challenges due to the long economic blockade from the United States.

But the service was more than a statement on economic reality and struggle....it was about how faith can be lived no matter where we are.

At the end of the service, participants were invited to make the following commitment, to:

**“Speak kindly and be a forgiving community;  
Accept every human being as unique and worthy to God;  
Keep the hope in a future of justice and peace, and  
Receive children in order that they may be able to dream,  
laugh, dance, and love without discrimination.”**

Are these biblical concepts? I hope they are, since they are written by believers in Cuba. But yes, of course they are, as they reflect the essence of the story of the forgiving father from today.

Do not block affirmations of life or assertions of goodness to others, and never disrupt opportunities to dream, laugh, celebrate, dance and love.

In the last year, the name of Scott Darling has gained prominence in certain newscasts. Now around St. Andrew's Place that is the name of the Chair of the Place Board, but it was actually our Scott Darling who told me about the other Scott Darling. Scott Darling no. 2 was in the White House this past month, a member of the Stanley Cup championship team Chicago Black Hawks.

Darling has arisen into prominence as a back-up goalie, supporting Corey Crawford, one of Canada's top goaltenders, in the race to this year's Stanley Cup.

But over a week ago President Obama called him out not for being a back-up, and not for being as tall as some basketball players or football linemen, but for his generosity and care.

Scott Darling grew up idolizing Black Hawk goalie Ed Belfour, but what the President wanted to note was a story that happened recently in Arizona. Darling came across a man who was down on his luck, and he paid for the man to stay in a hotel for a month to try and get back on his feet. He even bought him some groceries. He told no one except his fiancé, but somehow news got out through an Uber driver who told a beer league hockey player, and next thing you knew the story was everywhere.

Now you may say that Darling is a professional athlete, known to make millions, but as a newer player Darling makes \$575,000 this year. That may seem like a lot of money to most of us (my own father worked 45 years of his life and probably did not make that much money in his whole working career), but it still shows a compassion to another.

Obama said he would have more concern for and respect for Darling's privacy, but since the story is now "out there" he wanted to say that this was the kind of good deed that bears repeating – done even if there was no one there to see it.

That is the Chicago way, the President proclaimed, yes, even the American way. I only wish the President had said it was the action of Christians, or better yet people of faith. The early Christians were known as "People of the Way," and the Black Hawks' Scott darling was sharing what "That Way" is all about.

Then there is the story of Nazim Lawrence, a ten year old boy out to a NASCAR event with his father and he found a wallet lying in the concession area. He checked the ID, and saw a picture of the owner on her driver's license. Rather than watch the proceedings of the race, Nazim spent the rest of the day looking for the woman who lost her wallet.

It turned out she had already left – she lost the wallet just as she was about to leave the event, so Nazim sent her her wallet in the mail with a note, hoping this would bring her joy and saying he thought she was a very nice person by her smile on her picture, and hoped getting her wallet back would bring a smile to her face again.

The recipient was delighted to get her ID and credit cards and \$38 back, but even more exciting was the lovely note that came with her wallet. She told her friends on facebook about this nice young man and his kindness, and soon the world knew about this caring 10 year old. He even reached the attention of Ellen DeGeneres on her talk show.

Nazim, like Scott, lived life like it matters, and did not live life as a miserable, negative person.

You see elsewhere in America during the current political cycle debates and attacks going on that hardly seem like a movement of the Spirit or the essence of the Christian faith.

This American Presidential campaign reflects views that are Christian and consistent with the teachings of Jesus only if you think that the essence of today's parable is the older brother's outlook. Protectionism, selfishness, following personal advantage, and putting others down. If that typifies the message of Christ and the goal of life, we have many leaders who will carry that message in a variety of nations and situations.

When we reduce the gospel to a message to look out for myself, we have reduced the gospel to the character of the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. We have made self-interest the norm, and forgiveness unnecessary.

The risk is not doing what is popular; the risk is doing what is right in the eyes of God.