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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Luke 15:11-32
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Estrangement and Grace: Lessons from the Prodigal Family

*“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*

My whole life I’ve heard the story of my missing Uncle; “Uncle Jack” was a ghost, living on the edges of my imagination. All I knew from family legend was that Jack left the family when he was 18 years old, angry and determined to free himself from his parents' clutches, Jack flew to California and never looked back. We never found him or heard from him- until 5 years ago.

The estrangement lasted over 6 decades. Every so often family members, aunts and uncles, would search for him at my grandmother’s pleading...something that got easier with the internet of course. But reconciling with Jack still eluded everyone’s grasp. Until a strange phone call was received in 2021. That phone call from a landlord of Jack’s, led to a reunion of siblings; Sometime during the pandemic, my relatives knocked on the door of a house in a quaint New Hampshire village and Uncle Jack answered the door. Seeing their shared smiles on one another’s faces, the brothers hugged awkwardly.

I followed the story of the reunion closely, learning bits and pieces about my uncle's very solitary, but accomplished life. Apparently, Jack had received a general discharge from the Army in his early 20’s, and later, became an engineer. He'd never married, gone to work for Boeing and traveled the world. Jack composed music, too, and loved Beethoven with a passion that matched the sweet strains of his younger sister's violin. Much to our collective relief, Jack we surmised had a good life!

Since that day of reunion, my aunts and uncles met a half dozen times over the past few years, but they emailed frequently...various cousins of mine reached out to Jack, too. They were very careful not to scare this newfound brother away again. Some siblings found it too painful to reconnect, but others kept watering that garden of renewed relationships; the rift was healing. What was lost was miraculously found. God’s timeline is not our own.

Time grew shorter as we learned that Jack was getting some kind of medical treatment, no specifics were shared but we were concerned. I waited patiently until my turn to meet him.

One day in late September I got my chance. We received a call from Uncle Jack’s friend from whom he rented a room saying, “come now.” Jack was in the end stage of esophageal cancer. We should come “now”.

On that fateful morning, I walked up the stairs two at a time to Jack's attic bedroom, and there he was sitting up in his twin bed with flowery wallpaper talking to his brother, that looked like a throwback to my Grammie's house. "Uncle Jack" I called out to him, throwing my arms around him. "I'm so happy to finally meet you!"

His pale face lit up with the sweetest, warmest smile. I asked if I could give him another hug and we embraced again. I could feel his skeleton through his shirt; his once broad shoulders were now concave. He was all bones and smiles with a huge, luminous face. His delight and expressions weirdly matched my Grandfather's and many other family members! We laughed at that!

A surprise to me was Uncle Jack's warmth, openness and curiosity. He was as hungry to know me as I was to know him. I told him I'd heard that he'd been to Saudi Arabia and in fact had ...

"I lived there for 3 years..." He said, "What cities did you travel to?"

I told him about the Tree of Life journey from our church in 2022 and visiting Jeddah and Medina and the generous hospitality of the people we met there.

We talked about faith and though he shared his lack of anything regular, he brightened when talking about the kindnesses of the nuns at his Elementary School that he's never forgotten.

I got out my phone and showed him a few family pictures...and asked him if we could snap a quick photo of us. It's the only one we have of Jack as an adult, and at 80 years old.

As effortful as it was for him, he wanted to keep talking as much as I did. We talked until he had no voice left and needed to lie down. I hated to leave him...so many questions and so little time.

What happened to drive you away? I wanted to ask....

Were there times you wanted to come back?

Did you have a good life?

What is your favorite music, favorite books to listen to?

Did you know how much we missed you?

Questions that in the end died with him.

A week later, we were back at Jack's bedside. He was asleep now and death was near. I sat holding his hand, I told him how much it meant to have that first visit.

I whispered how much I missed knowing him in my life. And how I always hoped to meet him sometime down the road. I wanted him to know that at every Christmas when I was a kid, his name was mentioned ..., he was never forgotten. And always loved however imperfectly.

In those last moments with my uncle, I listened to his breathing, blessed him and sang the Irish blessing. He moved a bit as his breathing slowed, and I prayed he could hear me

I finally let go of his hand and left the room for the drive home.

Two days later, we learned Jack died in the early morning. His friend told us that in the past few years she'd never seen Jack so happy. I take great comfort in that.

In the Prodigal Son story, the father sees his child from a long way off. He's been waiting for God knows how long. Maybe 50 plus years as was the case in our family... The unconditional embrace of love the adult child receives is one I know intimately in my own life.

Maybe you, too, have received or given that holy and wholehearted embrace. Maybe like many people you are waiting in the distance for a sighting of your beloved.

Estrangement is a weight millions of people and families carry. It gets heavier and harder over these Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

It's often the "painfully deep" secret in a family with all kinds of stigma, isolation and shame attached to it... As in my own extended family, it's the proverbial prodigal elephant in the room.

The long tables of our holiday gatherings are always missing someone, aren't they?

Whether from a loved one dying or a loved one too far away or too toxic or too damn impossible to deal with.

Maybe you need to save yourself and distance is the healthiest way, the only way.

Maybe, like a dear friend of mine, Instagram keeps you updated on your adult child's life and you're praying that someday he'll come home to Massachusetts.

Every one of our stories is unique. And yet, not uncommon.

In the book *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*, Dr. Karl Pillemer writes that the landscape of estrangement is so familiar to many families that readers should know that "your family's situation is not the worst or the weirdest in the world, and that you are not alone."¹ In Pillemer's research, nearly 30% or more of American families surveyed report an estranged family member. For all sorts of reasons, that's millions upon millions of us.

I do know that the joyful reconciliation some of us in my family experienced with Uncle Jack has offered a healing that resonates through the generations.

I wonder about that biblical Prodigal family... reading the text we can see that this is not a romantic notion of family life. Luke's parable is not a fairy tale. There's pain in each character's life from the younger wayward child to the "always good but never feels good enough or appreciated" one at home with the parent who waits for and loves his children lavishly even as he doesn't really seem to know them at all...

Yet, the image of an Unconditional Loving God comforts me is the God who waits at the edge of the field for us while I'm/we're still a long way off, beckoning one home. And celebrating with unbounded joy when we arrive.

As Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen, in his classic book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, wrote, “The story of the prodigal... is the story of a God who goes searching for me and who doesn’t rest until (Love) has found me.”²

The joy of homecoming Nouwen shared, is made of a “Joy that never denies the sadness but transforms it to a fertile soil for more joy.”

Next spring, our family will gather at a graveside service for my Uncle Jack. We’ll meet at the one true home Jack ever had in rural New Hampshire and honor the person we loved who was lost for so long and then rather quietly and miraculously, found. At the end of his life.

The only word that fits is Grace. Grace upon Grace upon Grace.

Imprinted indelibly on my heart is Jack’s childlike and magnificent smile he showered upon me when we first met. It was love, pure and grace filled. An unexpected gift of recognition and joy. That smile will be shining brightly among us I’m sure as we all sing (as we often do at Irish funerals) “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and “Oh Danny Boy” into the morning air.
(I sing a cappella)

Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling

From glen to glen, and down the mountainside,

The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling,

It’s you, it’s you, must go and I must bide.

(Choir to sings...)

But come ye back when summer’s in the meadow,

Or when the valley’s hushed and white with snow,

It’s I’ll be here in sunshine or in shadow,

Oh, Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so!

¹ Pillemer, Karl A. Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*
