

**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware**  
***Homecomings - sermon by Rev. Pamela Wat***  
**Sunday, August 18, 2019**

The younger son loses his way, but ultimately returns home. Others (besides me) have taken creative license in retelling this story. The creative license I have most heard is to change the ending of the story. Some people don't like that the younger brother just waltzes back home and, not only isn't punished for his bad choices, his father uses what essentially belongs to the loyal older brother, to throw a party for this jerk. If you have siblings, you might have a sense of which sibling you are in this story – or if you are a parent, you might know which kid is which in your family.

The ending that some people like to rewrite is that, when the younger son returns home from his period of betrayal and debauchery, the father welcomes him, but instead of throwing a party for the newly returned son, the father celebrates the older son who never left. I like to keep the original ending.

But in my prequel to the Prodigal Son story, as these two boys were growing up in the ancient near east, I imagine that their father read often to them this sweet book by Nancy Tillman, "On the Night You Were Born." Maybe over and over, the boys would plead to their father, "Daddy, read us again, the book with the polar bears dancing until dawn." And the father would always comply (even though he had worked hard all day long and there was much to do before he himself could go to bed) and as the father turned to that final page he'd look at his boys, right in the eyes, and say by memory, "Heaven blew every trumpet and played every horn on the wonderful, marvelous night you were born." And he'd feel the weight and truth of those words and the immense love he had for each of his boys.

And so imagine his heartbreak when one of his beloveds became estranged and lost.

And imagine his joy when that beloved son returns home.

Many of you know that I was born and raised here in Wilmington. Let's be clear though; I am not the prodigal child here. The first time I ever entered this sanctuary, it was in the 1980's and I was a teenager attending St. Mark's High School. I was a life-long Roman Catholic at that point and I had no idea what Unitarian Universalism was. I had a summer job working as an assistant teacher at the Educational Enrichment Center, and I don't remember why I walked into this sanctuary. I remember that I was alone and, looking at the layout of the building now, I'm thinking I must have overshoot a trip to the church office (maybe I was dropping something off). But I walked into this space and even though I had never before been in a Unitarian Universalist church, I knew that this was a sanctuary.

I knew it was a sanctuary because like all the other sanctuaries I had known, it was big and grand. It had pews and a large pulpit (that we don't have now). High ceilings. It just had a certain look about it. I remember that I paused when I crossed the threshold into this room. It was clearly a different space from the hallway, from the daycare, from outside even. I remember that I looked up, which is I think the intention behind churches having such high ceilings--to invite us to look up in our lives.

Without knowing anything about Unitarian Universalism, I knew immediately that this was a place where holiness lived. I knew that if some Mother/Father God existed that they could be found (if

nowhere else) right here in this room. I remember that I walked to the center aisle, faced the chancel, and genuflected (which is, as a Catholic, what I had learned to do—kneel and make the sign of the cross when facing the altar). And then I went back to work.

It would be almost twenty years before I would return to this room. In those twenty years I experienced high school and college graduation. I earned two master's degrees, one in performance art and one in divinity. I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for ten of those years. I was married and divorced in that time. In that twenty years I left the Roman Catholic church of my childhood and experimented with other forms of Christianity, with Buddhism, Wiccan, Toltec spirituality, Hinduism, and Judaism.

When I returned again to this sanctuary, it was 2006 and I had returned to Delaware to spend a year in a chaplain residency program at Christiana Care. I was religiously adrift, despite having a seminary degree and feeling called to ministry. My liberal Quaker chaplaincy supervisor told me I was Unitarian Universalist and I needed to go figure that out. And so one Sunday morning I came here to this sanctuary. For the first time in my life I walked through those heavy, wooden, carved doors that once occupied the threshold of this space. I sat in a pew. And I knew that I was finally home.

I wasn't here more than a few months before I decided to move to Texas to help my brother and sister-in-law take care of their children, but this community had made enough of an impact on me that I continued my preparations to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. As soon as I got to Texas, I found a local congregation and joined, and a few years later I received my ministerial fellowship with the UUA and became the Minister of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Denton, Texas.

Over the years I have returned to this sanctuary from time to time for Sunday worship. On one such visit, five years ago, my parents were both navigating some health issues and I was in Wilmington for two weeks helping them out. The Sunday I was here was a youth led service and I sat quietly in the back as members of the youth group talked about different colors they liked. And one person talked about yellow because it was the color of his favorite flower—the dandelion. And he talked about how dandelions get framed as weeds, but how they are also quite beautiful and how they can make an ordinary lawn, look extraordinary. And I thought about my life and my struggles. And in that hour, I found my center and my strength. But I also found something of beauty.

It did not occur to me then that I would ever be the minister of this church. What did occur to me is that this community would always be a place where I could find home. And it wouldn't matter that the ceiling was high or that the sermon was spot on. It wouldn't matter whether we sang on or off key. It wouldn't matter if the furniture had been changed out or the floors redone. It would still be home.

Because home is not a place outside of us, but that place inside where we refuse to stay lost. This room is not home, but it is a space where we come over and over again so that we can return home to our wholeness and our holiness. It is a place where we can return to some inherent, authentic sense of self -- a self that the world celebrated when we were born. That's right -- the world celebrated you when you were born.

Home is the place where we find God or spirit or Love or Life. Where we remember clearly how incredibly precious this life is and the lives of those around us. Home is where we forget to feel "too busy" or where we stop being wound up in petty disagreements. Home might be the place where you can stay in recovery instead of addiction. Where the desire for material wealth goes away. Where

instead of fear and clinging and short term “feel goods” we remember to look up or out. Home is where we find the inspiration and strength to bring about justice in the world and we develop the motivation to fight for what is right. And our religious work is to stay grounded in that interior “home” even when the world is spiraling out of control. Even when change is all around. Even when your beloved is lost. Even in the midst of pain and uncertainty.

Ram Das, a wise spiritual teacher, once said that we are all just walking each other home. In that sense “Home” is about some unity with the divine that we encounter at death, and no matter what you believe about the afterlife, we might all agree that our work together is simply to help each other journey well toward death, which is to say we are all just helping each other live each day well.

Back in April and May, when I was candidating to be your minister, I got to return again to this building. The pews were still here then and during one of those meet-and-greets, someone asked me, “What do you think about moveable chairs in a sanctuary.” I admitted that I didn’t have an opinion about moveable chairs until I was officiating a wedding a few years ago in the congregation I served in Denton, Texas. One of the women in this couple moved through life in a wheelchair. And I was so grateful that we had already added a ramp to the chancel some years before. And I was especially grateful when, the day of the wedding, ushers could remove chair after chair from the sanctuary as we realized that many of the guests to this wedding were arriving in wheelchairs. We quickly widened an aisle and we created places where folks could sit with whomever they wanted, wherever they needed, not bound by unmovable seating. And I realized that sanctuaries should be places where there is room for everyone.

This past week as I have come and gone from this sanctuary, I felt the expansiveness of this space. Not just how big the room feels without pews in it, but how big the welcome feels with automated doors, moveable chairs, a lift to get from one floor to another, a ramp where stairs used to be.

This congregation made a conscious choice to remove those big, carved doors from the threshold acknowledging both a desire for better physical accessibility through those doors, but also acknowledging that the carvings of our white forefathers were a distraction to the anti-racism work to which we are committed and that our country desperately needs. I know those doors had deep value and meaning for many of you. They are part of this congregation’s long history. I admire your choice to move them out of the way as we journey into the future.

Part of our work as a congregation is to create more and more space for people to find home, to create space where they can get in touch with the fullness of their humanity, the radiance of their spirit. This space should be a space where everyone can find their home.

In the story of the Prodigal Son there is so much focus on the son’s arrival in his father’s arms. What if the real moment in the story is when the son was laying in the mud eating leftover scraps of food from the farm animals, when he suddenly remembers who and what he is? What if *that* is the peak moment, where this lost son was no longer lost, but instead really clear and at peace. And he senses his future opening up with love. He can hear once again the wind whispering his name and the geese singing his song. That, right there, is the moment is when he is finally home.

His father’s embrace was simply that affirmation that the world wishes for our homecoming and longs for us to find our way to our best, most loving version of ourselves. May we all in this day allow our hearts to return to that holy place.