

*The Prodigal's Path Home*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*March 19, 2023, Fourth Sunday in Lent*  
*Psalms 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-20; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki [AB-eh-NAH-kee or waw-BAN-a-KEE] people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

Jesus taught and modeled unconditional compassion, forgiveness and love. He included people from other cultures, including strangers and even enemies. If Europeans had been following the true way of Christ when they arrived in America, their relationship with the people they found here would have been loving and respectful. Christian Europeans would not have enslaved or waged wars against the indigenous peoples or anyone else, they would have been strictly nonviolent, as Jesus taught us to be.

The world that we have created has gone far wrong, like the Prodigal Son in the story we will hear today, but like the Prodigal, we have a way back home. That path begins in our hearts and in the community around us, and we walk it by treating one another as Jesus would.

So please linger after the service again today to create a little pocket of God's realm on earth by extending your loving care and support to those around you, especially to those you do not know or you know are struggling.

**Call to Worship:** Two wilderness journeys serve as metaphors for Lent: the forty days Jesus spent being tempted and tried and the forty years Moses and the children of Israel wandered lost.

Jesus emerged from his wilderness full of the Spirit, personally transformed and prepared to transform the world with gifts the Spirit gave him in the service of love. The purpose of Lent is to help us open ourselves to transformation.

It is a mystery why we need wildernesses or dark nights of soul in order to evolve, why the butterfly needs to struggle through the chrysalis wall in order to have the strength to fly—it's just the way the Spirit of life works, and Jesus captured it in his story of the Prodigal Son.

We may be in the Lenten wilderness, but we are on a path home to Easter's Promised Land, and we have a loving God waiting to welcome us with open arms, and we have this beloved community of people to walk with us all the way. Let us worship together...

**Children's Time:** Good morning! Some religious people have strict rules about who is in and who is out based on what people believe and how people behave, and they exclude, oppress or even wage wars against those who are different.

Others see all people and all creation as one, and have compassion and love for all, including those who doubt or believe differently or whose behavior is not perfect.

The Pharisees harshly criticized Jesus for welcoming people they considered outcasts, so Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. The younger son asked the father for all the money that he was going to inherit someday, and his father gave it to him. Then the son went to another country and lived a wild life and wasted all his money on partying.

Then a famine hit and food was very expensive and he had no money left. He got a job feeding pigs but it paid so little that the pigs had better food than he did. He was totally ashamed and afraid of what his father would say, but he decided he would humble himself and go home and ask his father to hire him as a servant.

When he came over the last hill his father looked up and went running toward him. The son told his father all his wrongs, but his father was so happy his son was back that he kissed him and gave him a ring and made a great feast.

The older brother said hey, wait a minute, he went off and wasted all the money you gave him, meanwhile I have been here working for you the whole time and you never gave me a feast. But his father said, all I have is yours, you know I love you, but your brother was like dead and has come back to life, he was lost and now is found...

It is not easy to be as forgiving as the father, or to be as brave as the prodigal son who came home when he had done wrong. It's hard to let go of bitterness about the past. It's hard

sometimes to imagine that change is even possible, but Jesus taught us that we can always change and evolve to be more loving and wise.

We may struggle with this, but there is something we can always do to help us find the strength and wisdom we need. Can you imagine what that might be? Pray!

Let us say together the Lord's Prayer...

### ***The Prodigal's Path Home***

The word prodigal means to spend recklessly and wastefully, to throw away what we have with both hands.

This week President Biden approved a massive new oil drilling site in America's largest pristine wilderness, and a similar new joint project of France and China is now endangering Uganda's rare and endangered species and Tanzania's largest water supply.

The fossil fuel industry is raking in huge profits and expanding production at a moment in history when everyone knows that burning oil, gas and coal is endangering all species, including our own.

The justification for this is an equally insane form of prodigality: war—the war in Ukraine and threat of a Third World War.

The weapons and fossil fuel industries are entangled in sinister ways. The military of every nation combined amounts to one of the largest single consumers of fossil fuels and contributors to climate change. But warfare using modern conventional weapons causes staggering environmental damage in many different ways, and nuclear war has the potential to make all life on earth extinct with a fraction of the total warheads, and Putin is openly threatening it.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I felt that while war could never be a positive good, it could serve as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force... But now I believe that the potential destructiveness of modern weapons totally rules out the possibility of war ever again achieving a negative good. If we assume that mankind has a right to survive then we must find an alternative to war and destruction."

King quoted President John F. Kennedy who said, "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind." Kennedy was echoing the last speech of President Franklin

Delano Roosevelt, written on his deathbed, toward the end of World War II. “More than an end to war, we want an end to the beginnings of all wars—yes, an end to this brutal, inhuman, and thoroughly impractical method of settling the differences between governments [by the mass killing of peoples]....

“If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the...ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace....

“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.”

King, Kennedy and Roosevelt all agreed, the survival of humanity depends on us abolishing war. Roosevelt was wise to add that our doubt that this is possible is the only thing that can stop us from doing what a strong and active faith could accomplish.

The early church prohibited its followers from being soldiers. Early Christians belonged to many different churches that had strong disagreements, but one thing was unanimous across all churches for three hundred years, and that was a strict adherence to nonviolence.

The path to today’s prodigality began when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its state religion. Suddenly instead of there being no Christian soldiers, the entire Roman army was Christian, and instead of the church resisting the Empire, the Empire controlled the church.

Over time theologians and bishops developed a compromise called the Just War Theory. All the Christian teachers of the first three centuries had said that war was “a crime against God and humanity” as Gandhi put it, but for the next seventeen centuries up to today the church would try merely to influence governments to make their war crimes as moral as possible.

Just War Theory included two considerations. The cause of going to war must be just, and the way that the war is carried out must be just. Today’s war in Ukraine would fail the Just Cause test, like most wars in recent history.

But all wars fail the Just Means test if they use modern weapons and the tactics that employ them. To be just a war must not inflict suffering, destruction or death on innocent civilian noncombatants. This includes not damaging their means for survival, such as electric, water and waste systems—destroying the land kills civilians.

The United Nations estimates that civilians are now close to 90% of the victims of war. In the first year of war in Ukraine over 18,000 civilians were killed or wounded according to the

UN, most “by the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects, including shelling from heavy artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, missiles and air strikes.” We have no idea how many more will die slowly from the destruction of their systems for survival and the polluting of their water, land and air.

We can no longer pretend that war is ethical or justifiable. The only moral choice consistent with the teachings and life of Jesus is for war to be abolished, and nations to disarm.

Humanity is at the point in the Prodigal Son story where he had to face the truth of what he had made of his life. His survival was in question, as it is for humanity today.

The earliest Christian church was called The Way, and the first step on that way is self-emptying, or kenosis in the Biblical Greek. The life changing moment for the Prodigal Son arrives when he empties himself of ego and turns in absolute humility back to his father.

Emptying ourselves of our selfish self puts us in right relationship both to the external world ethically and to the internal world spiritually.

Kenosis enables us to take the second step which goes by another Greek name, metanoia, meaning to expand to a new consciousness. The Prodigal’s self-emptying opened the eyes of his heart to see the path back home.

Paul says if we are in Christ, meaning in the sacred way, “there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

The result of this transformation is an increase in agape, the universal, unconditional love of God that Jesus taught and showed, and the result of that agape is the creation of koinonia, the beloved community of God’s realm on earth where all are included and all are one, which is where the Prodigal Son story ends in love and oneness.

This is the transformation that the human race needs to undergo right now for our survival. It is our path home to a planet and global civilization that can nurture future generations without environmental devastation and without war .

Jesus knew that this transformation has to take place from the inside out, and from the bottom up. We are a tiny church in a tiny village, and this is precisely where global transformation has to start.

The path to the abolition of war begins in our heart where the Spirit of God, the greatest force in the universe flows. Gandhi called this soul force “the only thing on earth more powerful

than the atom bomb.” Let us suspend our doubt and open ourselves in faith to the guidance and power of that Spirit within us. Let us pray in silence...

**Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:**

Ten inches of snow  
Spring has arrived in Vermont  
We are used to it