***The Ministry of Reconciliation***

***The Prodigal Story***

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Fifth Week in Lent

**“***Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons.*

*The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’*

*“So, the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country.”* Luke 15:11-13

Your Life Matters.

Today I am preaching about the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son, but which one is truly the prodigal? And who are we in the story? Where is God? What will happen with our lives when we return home? What if our father dies before we return home? And what can separate us from the love of God?

A few weeks ago, I went to a fundraiser for the Sandwich Town Hall after being generously encouraged by some of my favorite townies Tobin, Bob and John. Reed declined the invite, but I ran off on a Sunday night for a concert and dance hall performance with the Catnip Junkies. They are a New Orleans style band, and it was delightful. Tobin pulled me aside and asked me to introduce myself to a new couple in town. Reluctantly, I stopped dancing and sat down to meet the new folks. Suzanne and Ryan recently moved to town for work at the hospital and are my neighbors across the street down in Norse Pines.

I asked Suzanne and Ryan if they wanted to dance, and she said yes. Quickly we were moving and grooving to the funky beats and having a blast. The Boys joined in and soon half the seated audience was up dancing to the band who had moved off the stage and down onto the dance floor. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to meet up soon. I asked if she would like to go for a walk with my golden retriever in the woods. I said I could give her some recommendations for babysitters and things to do as a newcomer with four kids in elementary school in Sandwich.

If I ever invite you on a walk in the woods, I must love you very much. I guard my time in the woods fiercely. It is my wild space and my wilderness time. I am a child of the wilderness and ran wild in the mountains of Colorado, so I need a daily dose of wilderness to meet the world head on. Suzanne is a native of Chicago and lived in the city of St. Paul, but she also loves the wilderness. I think that meeting and talking while walking in the woods or by the sea is one of the best ways to get to know someone. There is something helpful about the rhythm of the body in a walking gait.

Suzanne shared generously of her ideas and thoughts. We spoke this week about what I am preaching on she was interested in the Prodigal Story and shared her ideas on the story. She is Jewish and attends Cape Cod Synagogue; and she is also trained as a journalist at NYU and worked as a Producer for Minnesota Public Radio for ten years. Suzanne asks the best questions. Walking with her I am learning so much.

Suzanne told me of how she felt when her mom was dying from cancer a few years ago. Through that process of caregiving at the end of life, she became interested in storytelling and ethical wills. Here is the beginning of her website on Life and Legacy.

“**Your life matters.**

**I want to help you to leave your mark on the world.**

If you were to die tomorrow, what would you want your family and friends to know about you? What values, lessons and blessings would you want to bequeath to the next generation? If you want to explore these questions, the time is now. Even if you're young. Even if you're healthy. It's time to sit down and write your ethical will.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| *Family history is everything. I can help you not only tell important family stories, but I can help draw out the meaning behind those stories. An****ethical will****is a letter or series of letters you write to your loved ones to help convey what you stand for: what values you hope live on, what blessings you want to bestow, and how to address any regrets you have or messages of forgiveness.* |  |

Suzanne introduces herself on her website. Suzanne Pekow is a former public radio producer and a mother of four. When her mom was undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer at the age of 66, she tried to find ways to connect with her. Her rabbi suggested an ethical will. Pekow writes, “it took months for my mom to decide to write one. On the night before she died, she wrote down a few opening paragraphs, which are precious to me now.” Pekow became an Ethical Will navigator. Currently, she is training to be a therapist because of this pivotal time in her life.

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The Prodigal Story is a tale as old as time. When I sit down to talk with families after a loved one dies, there is often regret for things left undone, fights left unresolved, worries about finance and who will inherit. And the loss is palpable. There is no more time to have conversations with the beloved. They are gone. And we, the survivors, must plan the funerals, memorial, estate planning and try to figure out how to go on.

In the Prodigal Story, the son who ran off and lived with the pigs, as low as you can go as a Jewish person, he almost died as result of his reckless living. The obedient son resents his father all the time his brother is gone and now is actively hostile and almost ready to get rid of his younger brother when the fatted calf is killed, and the party is on despite him staying and doing all the work of the responsible son who should inherit everything. And the father, he’s not much better, he’s off killing fatted cow and striking up the band and setting up a huge party. The father tells off his angry older son saying, “Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he is found!” (Luke 15:31-32)

You see, the younger son was dead. Or at least the family thought he was dead. And in the Jewish tradition, dead is dead. There is no resurrection story like the Jesus story of resurrection. The Jewish faithful mourn the dead with kaddish. The body must be buried within three days. Then they sit shiva for seven days at home. The mirrors are covered and the community cares for the bereaved. And then the grieving family emerges, goes to worship and the dead are formally grieved for an entire year as the family marks the anniversary of the first year without the beloved. First birthday without them. First anniversaries. First Passover. First High Holidays. At the end of the year, more prayers are said, and the official grieving period is over.

And yet, we all know that grief is sneaky. She moves in mysterious ways. We may think we are ok, and then a song comes on the radio, or a scent of food your mother made or the smell of pipe tobacco your father smoked, or the sound of the waves remind you of a beloved sibling who loved to swim and immediately you are back in the thick of grief.

Well, Suzanne’s Life and Legacy work helps us out in the living days. Her work is particularly important to her because her mom didn’t get to finish her letter. And we all wish we had more wisdom and written or filmed words from our dearly beloveds who have departed.

Here is the basic outline of an ethical letter.

<http://dearfamily.dear-doc.appspot.com/html/sickletter.html>

**My name**

**Dear Family and Friends,**

I realize that my illness may be causing you some distress. You are working hard to support me and care for me in addition to all the other roles and responsibilities you have. Let me start by saying that I am very grateful to you for your loving care and concern. Your support is helping me cope with my illness.

**Life Review Task 1: Acknowledging people in your life:**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people in your life of whom you are proud. **Use this opportunity to acknowledge their accomplishments.**

**Life Review Task 2: Remembering Key Moments:**  
  
**Here are some highlights of my life and moments I have cherished.**

**Life Review Task 3: Asking for Forgiveness:**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people who you may have hurt. **Use this opportunity to ask for their forgiveness for specific issues.**

**Life Review Task 4: Forgiving Others:**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people who have hurt you.  **Use this opportunity to forgive them.**

**Life Review Task 5: Saying "Thank You":**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people in your life you wish to thank. **Use this opportunity to identify what they did for you and why you are thankful.**

**I want to thank you very much for everything you have done for me.**

**Life Review Task 6: Saying "I love you":**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people in your life you love

I want you to know that I love you very much.

**Life Review Task 7: Saying "goodbye":**  
In the space below, please write the names of the people in your life you love with specific farewell messages.   
  
I love you very much.  
  
Yours,[[2]](#footnote-2)

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I have a letter from my father on his death. He sends a farewell love letter to my mom. I have the original and my brother has a copy. In his beautiful script he tells my mom that he loves her and loves me and my brother Tim. And that he is a failure at work, so he decided to die.

This is not the kind of ethical will I want to give to my children.

I will take the time while I am healthy to write a letter and amend as I age. With a husband facing serious health challenges and living with prostate cancer, we are not afraid of dying but we are very aware of our fragile lives and the real possibility of mortality.

That is not a bad thing. To be aware that tomorrow isn’t promised. So, take the dog for a walk in the woods. Make a new friend. Throw the party you want to have. Have a BBQ; meat or vegan. Dance like no one is watching. If they are watching, they probably love it. And if they don’t love it, they aren’t your people.

And love. Love now. I love the Ram Das quote that “We’re all just walking [*each other*](https://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/04/getting-here-from-there-ram-dass/) home.” Here are few more fun ones to end this message.

“Treat everyone you meet like [*God in drag*](https://www.elephantjournal.com/2014/03/interview-ram-dass-talks-about-intellect-psychedelics-love-surrendering-to-the-imagination/).”

“If you think you’re enlightened go spend a week with your family.”

Go see where God is in drag and remember your family of origin will keep you humble. I always say, we all put the fun in dysfunctional families. Amen.

1. <https://life-legacy.weebly.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://dearfamily.dear-doc.appspot.com/html/sickletter.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)