

*Mercy for a Prodigal Planet*  
**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**  
**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**  
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When I was barely eighteen, I left home for the Army and never returned. I attended university and then moved to New York City. When I say I never returned home I mean I literally did not go back to my hometown or visit my family for many years. There is a story in there for another time. Years later, when I did return home, it was for short periods of time and I visited only a few select people. Interestingly, when I arrived home people stopped what they were doing, made time for me, and we celebrated. Today, I gladly return home, still visit those select few people, and I always receive a grand reception. The news that CJ is in town travels fast. It is good to be loved and celebrated.

My experience reminds me of the story of the prodigal son found in the Gospel of Luke. The parable begins with a man who had two sons, and the younger of them asks his father to give him his share of the estate. The implication is the son could not wait for his father's death for his inheritance, he wanted it immediately. The father agrees and divides his estate between both sons.

Upon receiving his portion of the inheritance, the younger son travels to a distant country and wastes all his money in extravagant living. Immediately thereafter, a famine strikes the land; he becomes desperately poor and is forced to take work as a swineherd. (This, too, would have been repulsive to Jesus' Jewish audience, who considered swine unclean animals.) When he reaches the point of envying the food of the pigs he is watching, he finally comes to his senses.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

This implies the father was hopefully watching for the son's return. In most versions of Luke, the son does not even have time to finish his rehearsed speech, before his father accepts him back wholeheartedly without hesitation. As the father calls for his servants to dress him in a fine robe, a ring, and sandals, and slaughter the "fatted calf" for a celebratory meal, the older son, who was at work in the fields, hears the sound of celebration, and is told about the return of his younger brother. He is not impressed and becomes angry. He also has a speech for his father:

And he said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time your commandment: and yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as your son came, who devoured thy living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf. The parable concludes with the father explaining that because the younger son had returned, in a sense, from the dead, celebration was necessary. The youngest son had been lost and is now found.

Let us think about the facts and lessons within this story. The son wanted to live independently

of his father. He was restless and rebellious. He demanded and received his inheritance and promptly left the father's home in search of what he thought was real living. The son discovered that life apart from the father was not all that he thought it would be. Freedom came with a high price. In fact, in the far country the young man quickly squandered his inheritance and found himself broke, friendless, and desperate with seemingly no way out of his predicament. His destitution led to desperation and the ultimate, degradation of his person, expressed by living in a pig pen.

But something beautiful happens in the story because the young man finally comes to himself, he comes to his senses. He hits rock bottom and realizes the error of his ways. He remembers how good he had things when he was in his father's house and he repents of his sin against his father and God and he determines to return to the father's home. What he finds when he returns home is probably not what he expected. I'm sure he expected a long lecture and some punishment. But the loving father with outstretched arms received and restored him to full rights and privileges of son ship. There was redemption and rejoicing. The father was there all along waiting for his son to return home. I believe there was never a day that went by that the father thought "maybe today my son will come home."

For me, this story is about a breakdown in relationship. Think about it. What would you do in such a situation? Would pride prevent you from returning home or restoring a relationship? Would stubbornness push you toward self-destructive behavior such as addiction to drugs or alcohol? Or perhaps you might feel your parent no longer loved you and would not want you back. This parable is also about each of us. A father stands waiting for the time when his child will at last realize the need for a lasting and satisfying relationship with him. And so too dies our planet. Waiting, watching each day, when we will return and want to reconnect and reenter in loving relationship. It's easy for me to reflect on this story and think about our relationship with the planet. Reconciliation with our planet is possible. All prodigals come home.

Reconciling with Mother Nature is a theological concept. How can humanity create peace with planet Earth? is a theological question. We Unitarian Universalists understand this concept and wrestle with this question. This idea of making peace with the planet came to me after reading Barry Commoner's book, *Making Peace With the Planet*. Commoner argues that, despite billions of dollars spent to save the environment, America is still in a deep environmental crisis. Author Deborah Brosnon tells us, "Even if we declare a truce today and start to live more sustainably, it will take decades, if not centuries, for Earth to recover." But this is no reason for us not to create peace and have mercy on our planet in the here and now. Like the prodigal son it is time for us to leave the Las Vegas of our living and come home to restore and to reconcile.

In our oceans, two-thirds of commercially harvested fish species are overexploited. By 2030, there will be more plastic than fish in the sea. Coastlines are eroding, and cities are sinking as sea levels rise. Mangroves and reefs that ordinarily protect them are either being cut down or are dying from climate-induced changes like rising sea temperatures. Because of the greenhouse gasses pouring into the atmosphere every day, our planet is heading for a 3°C to 5°C rise in global temperatures that will wreak havoc on our health, wealth and world. Living out of balance with the environment is culminating in a pressing existential crisis. Instead, imagine waking up every morning with the intention to make peace with the planet. Each of us can be the

change we need by pushing our leaders in the public and private sectors to be better stewards of the Earth.

Investing in green infrastructure can solve our energy and infrastructure needs while restoring biodiversity, which has suffered over recent decades. We need to connect global finance with climate risks. Financial markets need to finally start aligning investments with their actual costs and benefits to people and the planet. I say put the costs of planetary destruction and pollution where it belongs — on those who cause it. I intend to make peace with the planet by choosing wise and compassionate actions, from how I spend money to which places I visit and what leaders and causes I support. Aligning action with intent will build inner peace and a better world. Peace, after all, comes with choosing to do what is right.

I recently read this quote by activist Karl Meyer. He said, “The experience of my whole life tells me that we, in America, must learn to live in a radically different way. We must consume less, destroy less, and share the wealth of Earth with all that is alive around us, or we cannot have lasting peace with all who need to survive and thrive with us on the same planet.” When we degrade the natural world, we desecrate creation, however you understand creation. We commit a crime of the first order when we dishonor our planet by corrupting and polluting what we were entrusted to care for. Mercy, immediate mercy for the planet is what we are being called to do.

Some are probably saying that I’m preaching to the choir. I recognize that to be true. But the intent of this message was to remind you of our commitment to the earth as Unitarian Universalists but, also to inspire you, challenge you, to go further, go out and change hearts and minds. If we can’t appeal to others with science in creating peace, surely appealing to morality in creating peace will take us further. I leave you with the words of Quaker George Fox. He wrote, “We call upon Friends to examine their own lives to see if their own patterns of consumption reflect self-centeredness and greed rather than a concern for living harmoniously in the creation, that we might witness to the world that harmony. We call upon the nations of the world, and in particular our own governments, to enact laws and reach agreements which will protect the creation from the effects of human exploitation, greed, and carelessness.”

Like the prodigal son, our planet has hit rock bottom. Like the prodigal son, let us come to our senses. Let us realize the errors of our ways. May we have mercy for a prodigal planet. Prodigals do come home.

May it be so.