



**Plymouth Congregational Church
2001 E. Grand River Avenue
Lansing, MI 48912**

June 19, 2011

FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

Father in the Middle
Rev. David Bandfield

Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

My name is Shaphan, the son of Mishael. My story is fairly well-known and I am ashamed of it. I was the younger of two sons; my older brother was Jachin. As the elder of two sons, he was entitled to a double share of our father's assets. And though our father was not horribly wealthy, he was a man of some means and held property and servants which made up a fairly respectable estate.

That's really all I could see, as I was growing up. I saw my father living a comfortable life with no real demands. He had servants to tend to the more annoying work that had to be done, and he spent much of his time simply managing the overall picture. I saw him living a relatively easy life and I knew that it would be mine when he died. And, like most everything else in my life, I was impatient to get what I wanted, and I was spoiled.

And, I usually got whatever I wanted. Father was well enough off that he afforded a lifestyle for us that was the envy of many. We had clothes and food that were quite nice and we did not need to work terribly hard to have them. At least, I never worked terribly hard. My shame begins there. I did very little to help with the responsibilities of our home. I enjoyed telling others what to do, but I was annoyed that I had to answer to my father and I looked forward to being out from under his authority and control.

When I made my request to receive my inheritance, I look back and see it now as rude, but it was within the laws that governed such things. A father can abdicate before his death and divide his wealth. I knew that and it is what I asked for. And, like most things I asked for, my father gave in and did it. And I wasted no time in claiming my new, independent life. I managed to liquidate most everything in a matter of days, and then took myself several days journey away to start my new life.

I had it all; everything that I wanted. Different people have described my lifestyle as “loose” or “frivolous.” I’m afraid that my brother, Jachin described it best – devouring my property with prostitutes. I lived high for a fairly good long while. My third of the estate was enough to provide me an extremely comfortable lifestyle, but only for what I saw as a shockingly short time. I had no idea and was stunned when I realized that my money was running out. I spent and borrowed and blew it away. When it was gone, so were my so-called friends, and I had nothing. I eventually sold everything to settle debts and was quite literally living in the streets with nothing but what I wore.

A Gentile pig farmer gave me work, feeding his herds. As you may know, they are loathsome creatures to us; we are forbidden not only to eat them, but we cannot even raise them. I retained enough dignity to not eat their food, and so I stole to feed myself. I had arrived at a point that was as low as possible. I had nothing, I stank, I was filthy and hungry and had no self-respect. It was during that time that I began to realize just how badly I had behaved and what it had cost me. I wanted to go home. At night, I cried for my home and my father, but I knew that my shame would never allow me to go back as the son who had left...

My name is Mishael... I know that you have heard of me, the father of two sons, Jachin and Shaphan. Jachin was always the perfect boy. As my firstborn, I leaned on him. One day, he would take my place and carry on my estate and my name. Somehow, he always seemed to know of that pending responsibility that was his. Even as a small child he would work hard alongside me. Tending crops and herds, working on our buildings and pens. Quite frankly, I had enough means to avoid doing very much myself, but I liked keeping at least a small hand in it and always felt that it bolstered the attitude of my servants and slaves to see me putting in some effort alongside them, sharing some of the work. And Jachin was always there, working hard even as a boy, tackling chores that he was barely able to manage.

Shaphan was of a different make. I have often felt surprised at how different they were. They were both obviously raised by the same parents; they both grew up in the same household under the same rules and circumstances... that's not entirely true. Jachin never seemed to want very much so I never really gave him anything that he didn't need. Shaphan was always asking for something. As a little boy he enjoyed toys, when he was approaching manhood he enjoyed finer clothes. As my son, I was hard-pressed to say 'no' to him. I had the ability to give him pretty much whatever he wanted, and I enjoyed doing it. I was able to give him leisure along with everything else. And even when I saw him lounging about with his friends while Jachin and I were managing the herds, I loved him no less.

When he came to me and asked for his inheritance, I was a little surprised, at first. On the other hand, the things that he asked for tended to grow in size and value as he grew older. I knew that he was anxious to be his own man and not merely "my son." I was afraid of what he might do, but I held onto a hope that maybe this would be the thing to bring him around. Being totally in charge of his own affairs, I thought that he might come to understand the responsibilities that go with such a position. I also know that even then,

I was lying to myself. I had never been able to teach him responsibility; how was he ever going to acquire it on his own?

I gave him his third. Primarily it was a matter of lands, crops, herds, and servants. Almost immediately, he sold it all. He amassed a significant amount of cash and set off with some servants to commence his new life. We said goodbye and that was the last that we were to see of him for a great, long while. I fretted and worried about Shaphan every day. Hearing no news was not good for my ears. I thought that, if he succeeded in making a name for himself, we would hear of his influence and status. As it was, the silence was deafening. And it went on for a long time.

Jachin never said a word about his brother. I knew that he was angry beyond words over what Shaphan had done. But he kept on, just as he always had. He was the perfect, first son; working the estate, managing the servants and their labors in an efficient and fair way. He did not complain or ask for anything beyond his needs. Though angry over Shaphan, I thought he was content with his lot. In short, everything seemed to be as it should, except for the loss of Shaphan, and I longed for things to be as they used to be. And I knew that they never could. If Shaphan had succeeded in his new life, he would never have need of us again. If he had failed, and even if he came back home, how could things ever be the way they were?

I will never forget the day that he came home. I was in the fields, tending to one thing or another when I saw him. I did not recognize him at first; he appeared as just another one of the beggars that we attracted. Thin, dirty, obviously in great need. When I recognized him, all I felt was joy for his return, compassion for his state. I ran to him, hugged him and kissed him. He pushed me away, dropped to his knees and put his head to the ground. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

I suspected that it was true. I could not imagine how he had gotten to such a state, but he had obviously squan-

dered at an appalling rate. Somehow, it did not matter then. I shouted to my slaves to bring my best robe, and a ring and sandals. I called to others to dress a fatted calf and prepare a feast for a celebration...

My name is Jachin... I am the oldest of two boys, the sons of Mishael. My brother, Shaphan, was a thorn in my side from the day he was born. I would not go so far as to say that I hated him, but I was perfectly happy without him.

As children, he always had everything he wanted. It seemed like he could ask for anything and he would have it. Toys and playtime; Mother would always set aside time whenever he wanted to play. I would go to the fields with Father and work with him. I did not completely understand why he did that – he had enough servants to take care of everything – at the same time, I had at least an inkling that it was important to put some of yourself into your works. It was not something that Shaphan ever did.

It was a strange thing. On the one hand, I was exceedingly jealous of him. He had everything he wanted; things that I never had or even asked for. At the same time, it was not as if I wished to have those things for myself. I never questioned my father's love for me, but I was incensed at the way that he coddled and fussed over the brat. Shaphan was selfish and arrogant. As we grew, he became even more so and I had no use for him.

I was shocked when he asked our father for his inheritance. It was not unheard of, but I saw it as incredibly rude and insensitive. And I was shocked that Father gave into him. Though on second thought, it was the normal response; Shaphan always got what he asked for. In short order, he sold off the lands and herds that he had been given, and packed up his fine clothes and toys and headed out with his servants to make a new life for himself. He would be in charge and be his own master. Shocked or no, I was glad to

see him gone. Though the estate was significantly reduced, there was still plenty to work with and I threw myself into building it back up to what it had been. The insult of what Shaphan had done would always remain, but at least he himself was gone and I was glad.

I never spoke of him. I knew that Father was consumed by worry for him, but I cared very little. It was a good riddance, as far as I was concerned. I suspected that Father held some fantasy of how good it would be to have him back home, but I knew that was impossible; quite literally impossible, because our father had abdicated. It was the one good thing that came out of the whole mess. Shaphan no longer held any claim and could never be received back as our father's son. And I was glad.

I will never forget the day that he came home. I was in the fields, tending to one thing or another. At the end of the day I was returning to the house. There was an obvious commotion; I could even hear music playing as if a celebration was underway. I could see slaves preparing for a roast. When I was close enough, I called to one of them and asked what was going on. You already know what he told me. And he told me about Shaphan's appearance and the little that he had heard of his situation – a short story of how he had ended up where he did.

I was furious. I was hurt and I was angry. I could barely contain myself and my rage. I was curious about what he looked like, but I could not endure the thought of confronting him. At the same time, I could not leave the yard. And so, I paced and fumed and pouted until my father came out. He did not surprise me with his words. He begged me to come in and greet my brother. I did not even use that word; I only spoke of him as "your son." I reminded him of what I had done – worked like one of his slaves, never disobeyed anything he told me, never asked for anything beyond what he offered me. And now, this other, his son, comes crawling and limping home after throwing away what he had been given – the fruits of our work – frittering it away

in a disgusting debauchery of loose living and whores, and now on his return he is once more given the best of everything!

I carried on in that manner for some time; Father let me go. He knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't be listening quite yet anyway. When I finally cooled a bit, what he said to me was both astonishing as well as undeniably and obviously true. He spoke with such a sincerity and conviction that his words bore into me. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

I think that the words that struck most forcefully were when he mentioned "this brother of yours." As much as I may have despised all that he had done – his wastefulness, his selfishness, his frivolous and playboy manners – he was my brother. He had been given only what he was rightfully entitled to by our father. And if he, his father and my father, was willing to bring him back, who was I to disagree? Part of my entire being was built on a respect for this man who had not only accumulated everything we enjoyed, but had raised me as well. My father; my elder... How could I oppose him in this, or any other decision that he might make? His mind was obviously sound; what is it that he saw in all of this that made it so different from my own perception?

My brother... He had wronged us. Or had he only wronged our father? It didn't matter. He had befouled our family and reputation and wasted our efforts on his own selfish and blatantly irresponsible behavior... He was still my brother... It was the first time that I truly understood that. And he had come home, and I had to hope that another chance given would be put to good use.

It has not been all sunshine and roses. I need time to adapt to these new thoughts. My brother came home, and my father taught me an enormous lesson. I have heard that the man Jesus has told our story – and that our father becomes a metaphor for God. I never did anything like my

brother did. I knew that I was a better person. And yet, how many times had I strayed from the path that God would have had me take? Does the degree of straying make a difference? Are my little sins less sinful than his bigger ones?

My brother is home. It has not always been easy; my memories and my pride interfere, but our father is a rock. However far we may stray, he is always and unbelievably at home and waiting.