

## With Our Whole Selves

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### The Power of One

**T**he mathematical definition of unity is a number by which a given element of a mathematical system can be multiplied with the result being equal to the value of the given element. The only number that springs to a nonmathematical mind as fitting this definition is the number one: one multiplied by one equals one.

This session looks at unity as it pertains to the individual, the one person. Unity related to the individual goes by another name: wholeness. To be a whole person, integrated in body, mind, and spirit, and aligned in word and deed, is a basic human yearning and a basic desire of God on our behalf. We need only look at the healing stories in the Gospels to see how true both of these assertions are: People reach out (the woman in Mark 5:25-34) and shout out (Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52) for the wholeness Jesus confers. It is as basic as the core beliefs that God is One and that we are made in the image and likeness of God. These beliefs merely articulate something we sense: that we are meant to be one, to be whole. Our yearning for wholeness can be understood as a journey of faith seeking this essential understanding.

### Taking Stock

The familiar story of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke gives us an outline of this journey with a starting point right in the middle of the story. The wayward one has run out of cash and the big times are over. This son of a wealthy landowner sits amongst the pigs, far from home in every way. In Luke 15:17, we read that

### Lectionary Loop

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C,  
Luke 15:11b-32

he “came to himself.” In contemporary terms, he “pulled himself together.” He was finally able, forced by dire circumstances of his own making, to take stock of his situation.

Facing up to current reality, particularly the reality of who we are and what we’re doing with our lives, is a critical aspect of wholeness. “The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook upon life,” according to Carl Jung. It is the process, often quite demanding, by which real options begin to emerge and from which we gather the energy to take action. Once he settled down and dealt with things as they really were, not as he was still wishing they could be, the prodigal son was able to get up and go home.

### **Going Home (Again and Again)**

Going home again is another important step on the journey toward wholeness. When he turned toward his father’s house, the prodigal was merely hoping for a safer, more comfortable existence. Upon his arrival, however, the compassionate father gives him much more than a cloak for his shoulders and food for his belly. The father restores the son’s identity: “My son who is lost has been found.” Any and all journeys that restore our sense of who we are, what we value, and to whom we belong, are like this homecoming, whether we achieve this sense on a therapist’s couch, through prayer and reflection, in conversation with friends, or by literally going home again to be surrounded by family dynamics and artifacts that have shaped us from childhood.

I’ll never forget my first trip back to my hometown as an adult. We had moved to the opposite side of the country when I was just turning seven years old. What made going back home particularly memorable was seeing a former neighbor. I thought she was quite old when I was a little girl, but there she was, still going strong. As we were catching up, she said, “You were always so concerned about all your friends, trying to make sure that everyone was happy and having a good time.” Well, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I don’t think of myself as a particularly nurturing person or someone who constantly makes a fuss over others. But

## **Sources**

C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1993); Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

the more I thought about her comment, the more I realized that it is true about me to this day. I feel really alive and true to myself when I am doing things that might help others enjoy their lives more fully. This homecoming gave me a new way to claim one aspect of my identity, one part of what makes me whole.

### Filling in the Gaps

Homecoming is where the story of the prodigal son ends. But where does it begin? It begins with this person's desire for something more; a dream or a vision or even just a wish. Taking our dreams, visions, and wishes seriously is yet another component of the lifelong process of seeking wholeness. Dreams and visions, wishes and desires, draw our boundaries out a bit farther and compel us to fill in the gap. The son who came home was not the same son who left. He was expanded by his experiences, and most essentially by the experience of going for his dreams.

I really want to know what kind of person—and leader—the second son became after the homecoming party was over. Did he continue on the path to wholeness? Did he live creatively within the tensions between current reality and dreams, informed by who he was and what he valued? In my imagination, he is newly equipped by his journey toward greater wholeness to “love the Lord your God . . . with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). I imagine him setting an example of growth and maturity for the older brother who is locked into external standards of duty and “right behavior” rather than following the path of his own heart toward wholeness. I imagine him draping the cloak of compassion with which he had been greeted upon his return around those in his father's service who were doing the detestable jobs he found himself doing when the money ran out.

### The Call to Wholeness

The journey toward personal wholeness is not something that pastors, or anyone called by baptism into Christian ministry for that matter, can put off

## Study Bible

Note that in the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the prodigal son is part two of Jesus' defense of “his practices on behalf of the poor” (*NISB*, 1883). The story is a response to verse 2, “And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” In reading the commentary in the context of individual wholeness, questions emerge about how our faith communities welcome the whole person when dealing with the poor, in addition to feeding the hungry and addressing other physical, potentially more immediate needs. This session aims to give permission to marvel at the “joy and festivity characteristic of God,” calling each of us to come to ourselves in wholeness.

## Teaching Tips

An interesting image to use for exploring our own journeys toward wholeness is the spiral. The journey is not linear; we don't go from point A (empty) to point B (whole). It is essentially about expansion, and along the way we return to some of the same issues and points. Draw a large spiral. Make some notes along the track of the spiral about your own journey toward wholeness. What is the center of that journey?

until they no longer have to attend to the needs of others. It is not a selfish luxury that takes second place to the “real” work of ministry and discipleship. Listen again to the two essential commandments of Jesus: “Love the Lord your God . . . all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30), and, “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12:31). It is intuitively obvious that love of self is foundational to our faithful response to these commandments.

Love of self that is not narcissism is wholeness. It is the holding together of dreams and visions with current reality in the context of who we know ourselves to be and what we value. It is a process, not a possession, to borrow from Peter Senge, an expert in leadership development. Senge writes about the essential leadership discipline, or principles and practice, of “personal mastery.” It is not mastery in the sense of dominion, but in the sense of being good at the craft, like a master woodworker or potter. Master craftspeople continue to develop their skills and intuitions over a lifetime. Being good at being ourselves is a lifelong process. The characteristics of personal mastery, according to Senge, are a sense of purpose behind our visions and goals; seeing current reality as an ally, not an enemy; perceiving and working with forces of change, rather than resisting them; being deeply inquisitive; feeling connected to others and life itself; sacrificing none of our own uniqueness; and being part of a larger creative process that we can influence but not control.

The story of the prodigal son can be read with pity and a bit of consternation for the one who wanders off and loses everything, or it can be read as a story of a great leader in the making. When the father pronounces the son “found,” perhaps it is the son who has found himself, his whole self. It’s wonderful to imagine where he goes from there; it’s wonderful to imagine where we will go on our own journeys toward wholeness. I’d like to think the math changes as our sense of wholeness, our individual unity, increases. Suddenly, it is no longer one multiplied by one equals one, but we become factors in the wholeness of others and the effect of love is exponentially increased.

## Reflections

1. How does your congregation support individuals—particularly leaders—on the journey toward wholeness?
2. Tell or write down the story of a homecoming occasion, a time when you were reminded of something essential about yourself or one of your core values. What were the circumstances that enabled you to have this insight? How can you set the stage for another opportunity to reflect on what matters most to you?
3. Dreams and visions are taken very seriously in the biblical story. How will you pay better attention to your own dreams and visions? Where do you see God at work in them?

## Teaching Tips

What if the prodigal son wrote his memoirs later in life? What would he say about the time he took off with his inheritance and lost it all? What would he say about the reception he received, first by his father and then by his older brother? What would he say about how this experience shaped the rest of his life? Offer an opportunity to imagine these memoirs, either in a discussion time or by giving people a chance to write them as if they were the prodigal son.