

## Love You Forever

There is a children's picture book written by Robert Munsch and illustrated by Sheila McGraw entitled *Love You Forever*. It was published in 1986. The first time I heard it was at a retreat for high school students in Florida where I served as teacher, campus minister, and eventually Student Activities Director. The story brings us through the life of a mother and son as she takes every opportunity to rock that baby "back and forth, back and forth, back and forth" as she sings "I love you forever. I like you for always. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

Today's Gospel reading from Luke made me think of that story and, particularly, that little song. But there are a few other things I'd like for us to consider when we look at today's Gospel lesson. First of all, we must look at what might have been meant by inheritance. Chances are, the son's inheritance was property or possessions. This meant that the son had to actually sell the land or possessions as if the father were already dead to get a large sum of money. Imagine your son or daughter doing to that to you. This is the same child that he probably

rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth and sang “I love you forever, I like you for always, as long as I’m living, my baby you’ll be.”

Secondly, we have to consider what the common foods were around the time of Jesus. People mostly ate bread, olives, olive oil, fish, figs, dates, pomegranates, garlic, onions, and anything else they could find. Meat was eaten only on special occasions as it could not be preserved so that they could eat it longer than a day or two. Remember, there was no refrigeration back then, particularly in the warmer climates. So, when the father told the servants to cook the fattened calf, it was a big deal, not only to the poor fattened calf, but to the servants and those who would celebrate. Putting this into perspective will allow us to delve a bit deeper into the story.

As we do so, I think we need to look at the brazen actions of the son who not only asked for his inheritance, but had the audacity to sell it to get money. He must have felt pretty good about what he was able to do, especially with what appeared to be his father’s blessing. I am sure he loved every moment of the carousing with women, drinking with his

new “buddies”, and eating the finest meals that he could find. What he didn’t realize was that the money would run out and we heard what happened then. I am sure that somewhere in his memory, though, he started to remember his father or his mother rocking him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth and singing, “I love you forever, I like you for always. As long as I’m living my baby you’ll be.”

Next, I’d like to consider the brother who stayed behind and worked for his father. The brother was probably more in line with the servants or “slaves” as this translation called them. He worked hard, always did the “right thing”, and never asked for anything from his father. He, too, was probably raised with the same loving parents as he showed no interest in leaving them. Our friend, Rev. Dr. Peter Wells, told me the other day, “I think the son who stays gets a bad rap. What the heck! He stays and does everything asked of him.” How many of us have always tried to follow the straight and narrow, please our parents, and do the right thing? Did you ever feel as though your good works had gone unnoticed? That must be what that son felt like.

His father, though, may have been remiss. While I am sure that son who stayed behind was very much loved, he didn't always hear it. I am sure that son also was rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth while he sang "I love you forever. I like you for always. As long as you're living, my baby you'll be." But the son may have been too young or was caught up in the moment.

Can you imagine the father's joy (they don't mention the mother, but I imagine her joy was the same) when, off in the distance, he saw his son who had left him? The son humbled himself before his father, and his father lifted him, hugged him, and probably wanted to rock him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and sing to him.

My dear friends, I believe that this is the love that God has for us. God has loved us forever. God has liked us for always! Even when we disappear, fall into bad ways of living, falling deeper into sin, God stands there, just like the father, with his arms wide open. Maybe even God comes running to us, picks us up in Almighty arms, and rocks us back and forth, back and forth, back and forth and sings to us, too! If this is your first time back at church in a while, welcome home! God

has loved you forever! If this is your first time at First Congregational Church or with Southwick Congregational, welcome home! God has loved you forever, too!

Whether we have fallen to temptation, did not offer forgiveness to another, did not forgive ourselves, or haven't been repentant, God will always welcome us home. God will always hold us, rock us back and forth, back and forth, back and forth and sing to us, "I love you forever, I like you for always, as long as you're living, my baby you'll be." Let us share the love of God and remind our friends and family that God's love for us is real.