

# Discovering Grace

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

## Introduction to the Scripture

We're returning to the Gospel of Luke today, continuing in our "Discovering" series for Lent. As new church members of old did in preparation for Easter, we have been exploring parts of what it might mean to take on a new identity in the Christian story come that Easter Sunday. We have explored some in spiritual hungers, promise, abundance, and now today Grace.

You're going to hear one of the blockbuster parables of Jesus found in Luke. You'll hear the story of an inheritance given, and lost, and a different kind of inheritance received... and of some good old fashioned family dynamics that might feel and sound familiar.

## Sermon

A colleague online reflecting on today's reading pointed us to the old Graham Greene quote:

*"You cannot conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God."*

Spoken like an older sibling. Youngers, we can all give thanks to God for the *appealing strangeness* that keeps bringing us home like in this parable. Perspective matters a lot in these stories of Jesus... it's part of the spiritual genius of his teachings, they can spin around on you and teach you new things as they turn in your sight... catching new light like prisms...

There is power in the intimacy of this parable. Many of us have some deep experience of feeling unworthy, cut off, or cast out... by our own doing, or by circumstance. Many of us have the story of one or more people who transformed that experience through welcome, openness, acceptance, forgiveness, grace.

It seems like some sort of "Chicken or Egg?" conundrum to figure out if family are those people who will always welcome you home, or if those who always welcome you home become family. I suspect that I will never know. I know that like a lot of people from my generation, I have a lot of "chosen" family. People who have no genetic material in common with me, but who have shaped me by their stubborn insistence that I am of them, no matter how far I run, or how long between phone calls or visits... I hope you have some of these people in your life. I hope some of them are in this room.

We often miss who Jesus is aiming this parable at, of course. We so easily slot ourselves into the worn shoes of the prodigal son... those experiences of grace which astound us and make us whole...

But Jesus is actually talking to the religious authorities judging his guest list (and us) as the older brother today... the prodigal son has his moment of revelation, of change, of being willing to even be a servant to his father just to be whole with him again... the transformation that is uncertain at the end? The elder. This is a story about those moments of grace which *offend* us just as much as anything else. This is about that “appalling strangeness” of God’s mercy.

There is intimacy here, because many of us have known family relationships and dynamics punctuated with the deep, intimate, and human cry: “It’s not fair.” It is, suffice to say, deeply unfair that the father spends extravagantly on the younger child who has squandered so much of his inheritance already... it is deeply “unfair” that the responsibility and frugality of the elder gets turned into fodder to celebrate the irresponsible... and yet... it is of God, Jesus insists.

One of the voices I love to listen to, Barbara Brown Taylor, warns us about our own temptations towards the righteousness of the older brother:

*At the end of the story it is the older brother who is standing outside in the dark, perfectly right and perfectly alone. Jesus has a relatively easy time with sinners. Their hearts are already broken, so it is not hard for him to get inside. But the righteous are like vaults. They are so full of their precious values and so defended against those who do not share them that even the dynamite of the gospel has little effect on them. [1]*

Holiness is just like that, it doesn’t care about fairness, just wholeness, it’s just looking for a way inside us. That’s what I hear in the core of the extravagant father’s actions today: he says to his complaining eldest... he thinks this is a story about inheritance... the father thinks it is a story about *family*.

My colleague John Gage, who has worked on a series of kind of “instagram proclamations” for the UCC, has one for this day I think: “**Grace is free, and it’s free for everyone, or it’s not grace and you should use another word.**”

We can all be tempted to look for that easy, or maybe just a little costly for others, “grace” in quotes. We can all create one line maybe safely off in some hypothetical distance, where we could not, should not welcome back one lost to us. We are all, at some level keenly aware of those people who we think are not worthy of redemption... of wholeness... of the next chance... especially not at our own expense.

*Not for nothing by the way, there’s a little detail that’s not often talked about... in the patriarchal structures of Jesus’s time, the eldest would have actually received a larger portion of the father’s inheritance... so there is actually room to view the outcome here as something closer to our own conceptions of justice... but even more the value is plain: the father isn’t worried about having a fair outcome, he’s looking for a whole outcome... the rootedness and groundedness of family.*

Where are the places in your life, in our life where we are being called to be offensively welcoming, offensively forgiving, offensively grace giving?

In this day in the wider world, I think of the work being done in the states and the country to work for more holistic systems of justice, sentencing, and mass incarceration, I think about the myriad ways in which we ask people to “pay their debts” to society, and then find structural ways to keep them in some annex to our communal life, deprived of jobs, of their rights to vote and participate in democracy... I think of the ways we police poverty or addiction as crimes and personal failings rather than symptoms of our own systemic failings.

In all these things, I wonder if we have gotten focused on what we (or others) are owed, either good or ill, instead of what we are: community, society, family. I wonder if we are the elder brother at the end of this parable, still uncertain if we will take the tender step out of the darkness of our own self-righteousness and in to the wild party of God’s love and grace.

Here in this place, I hope you feel that love, that grace, that welcome of God... wherever you have been... whether you have been responsible or irresponsible with the gifts you have been given. I hope that here we practice giving away free gifts for everyone... I hope that we take that affinity for throwing a party to celebrate wholeness and reconciliation with us into the world... a world that so desperately needs help coming in from self-righteousness and into the warmth of unimaginable grace. That our own fairness might become instead God’s justice. That our judgments might instead be conquered by God’s mercy... strange and appalling as it is.

May we become welcoming siblings reunited one to the other. Amen.

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1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1992. “The Evils of Pride & Self-Righteousness.” *The Living Pulpit* 1 (4): 39. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdah&AN=ATLA0000908564&site=ehost-live>. ↩