

“The Extravagance of Grace”

A Sermon Based on Luke 15:1-3,11b-32
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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Well, it sure didn't take Jesus long to gather a following. None of the official religious people in the Temple were telling it like Jesus did. Yet, as his gathering grew and grew, so did the grumbling. The shepherds, who likely had no experience with bathing, always were offending the well-to-do. The garish make-up and provocative clothing of the prostitutes caused the married women to pull their children and husbands close. Those concerned about the safety of Jesus argued daily with those who believed in the more the merrier. Distinguished officials complained about having to wait in line. Why couldn't there be some sort of VIP area free from the riff raff? Above all, it was the reverends and the ministers, the Rabbis and preachers who were especially unhappy about the quality of the company that Jesus kept.

“He greets sinners, the same ones we've been trying to whip into shape for years. He talks to them, welcomes them, and seems to enjoy them!” they fuss. “Us? We've studied Greek and Hebrew, endured ordination exams, and given our lives over to this work of ministry. So, if he's going to be best buds with anyone, it should be us, not to people who can't pass a criminal background check.”ⁱ As his movement grew, so did this unhappiness.

So Jesus told them a story. The story is probably one of the most familiar biblical stories. We have heard it many times. And we can examine it from a variety of perspectives. Many read the story from the point of view of the youngest son, the prodigal, the one who wasted his living far from home and who ended up going from bad to worse until, at last, he comes to his senses and runs for home, hoping against hope that he can put his life back together there. He may get himself together as a servant in his father's house, but that would still be better than wallowing with pigs.

John Newton, who wrote one of the Church's favorite hymns, identified with the younger son. In the year 1779, after a tumultuous life as a slave trader, a

dissolute life, a bitter and angry life, in which he mocked those who believed in God and tore down the faith of those who lived decently, he came to his senses and he gave his life to Christ. He found a welcome, a love, that, until that time, he had hardly suspected.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. T’was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved, how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.”

Others of us might identify with the father in the story, especially those parents of children who have gone, or who seem to be going, wrong. Read the story from the father’s perspective. Think of his pain. His youngest son has turned out badly. He loves the son dearly, and what happens? The boy demands his inheritance, what he claims will be his when his father dies. He’s saying, in essence, he wishes his father were dead. And then, having received his inheritance, he leaves home and is not heard from again.

We don’t know why the father yielded to his son’s demand. Loving parents know that their children are different. One cannot treat children exactly the same way. It makes raising children the most complex of human endeavors. One man has said that no one knows one’s true character until that one has run out of gas, declared bankruptcy, and raised a teenager.

Perhaps the father gave in because he figured if he did not his son would become more rebellious. Perhaps he gave in because he did not know what else to do.

Whatever the reason, many of us can resonate with the pain the father must have felt, the second guessing, the constant worry, the wondering: will my boy make it? will he survive? will he nevertheless become a decent man? will he ever come home?

And so there are those of us who understand what happens at the end of the story. We can understand why the father, upon seeing his long lost son in the distance, lifts his robe and runs to meet him. We understand, and pray that we

might act the same way, to embrace the wayward one, to welcome that one home.

II

But what about the other son, the elder brother? Do any of us read the story from his perspective? The older brother is like many of us. He gets up early and goes to work every day and does his level best to be responsible. Indeed, he feels he must be responsible. It is expected. Understanding the perspective of someone who has lived such a dutiful life, we can understand why he might become so upset about the welcome of the prodigal. We can understand why he might feel resentment.

First of all, that brat asked for his inheritance early. That was an outrage. He all but said, "To hell with my family." And then, it was just like that baby brother to waste it all. He never was responsible. He took it and just wasted it. All that wealth that it had taken our family generations to accumulate. He spent it on pleasures and high living. It served him right that he would end up feeding someone's pigs.

But now he comes home. And wouldn't you know it, Dad throws a party for him. Dad was always so weak with him. No one has ever thrown me a party. Dad has never said word one about how much he appreciated me staying here and doing what I was supposed to do.

I didn't waste Dad's money. I worked hard every day. A party for me? Even a thank you? No! And who do you think will be the one to take care of Dad when he grows old and can't take care of himself? Will it be my brother? No. It will be me.

Why does Dad throw him a party? Why not make him suffer, feel the weight of what he has done? He asked to be a servant. Let him be one, for awhile. Well, throw the party if you like. I'm not coming in for it.

Sound familiar? It should, because there is a bit of the older brother in all of us. There is a part in us that just doesn't like it when someone else gets something for nothing. The older brother is that part of us that measures every deed for its value, every person for what they have earned or deserve, and has

decided that by comparison, we aren't getting the measure we deserve, while someone else is getting more than they deserve.

It's important to understand to whom Jesus told this story and why. The tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus ate are not simply friendly people who have been misunderstood. Tax collectors were making a good living taking money from their own people for the Romans. Sinners were labeled sinners because of their behavior which had them ejected from the synagogue. The Pharisees, mindful of all of this, seemed to be able to see the corrosive effects of not distinguishing between good and bad people. For them, forgiving looked an awful lot like condoning.

For those who first heard this story, and perhaps for us today, the party is the really offensive part in the story. Some of those to whom Jesus told this parable were responsible people. They followed the letter of the law. They did what they were supposed to do. And when they looked at Jesus what did they see? They saw a man whom they recognized as a holy man. And they saw him welcoming sinners and eating with them. Honoring them with his presence. Telling them that God loved them.

The Pharisees didn't like it at all. The sinners hadn't toed the line as they did. Let them in, maybe, but don't give them a seat. Don't let them think they deserve to be there.

The Pharisees, in all their responsibility and duty, were missing the party. They weren't getting the message. They just didn't seem to understand that God's love was big enough to include them, too. Extravagance didn't seem to be a word in their vocabulary, Let alone empathy or compassion.

III

So, who are you in this story? Are you the older son, jealous that someone else, someone less worthy, is receiving God's love and grace? Are you the younger son, afraid to come home and ask for forgiveness? Are you the Father, who loves both of his sons dearly?

The youngest son learned something we all learn eventually. What are our real priorities in life? Where is life to be found? Do we appreciate just how good

life is? Have we reached the point where we have a sense of the extravagance of God's love? The younger son learned just how extravagant God's love is.

But the older son has something to teach us, too. Sharing God's love is not a zero-sum game. It is not the case that if we share God's love with the wrong people, then there will be less for the right people. And who are the right people and the wrong people? God's love is sufficient for everyone, and no one can do anything to merit God's love. None of us ever live perfect lives, even for a day.

So, to some extent, we are all prodigals. We have all squandered our inheritance. Who, then, do any of us think we are to keep score? God welcomes all of us back when we return. Some return sooner than others. And they are ushered into the party. Others, like the older son, arrive later. And I do like to think he let go of his woundedness to come in.

How can we, when we find ourselves welcomed in, become upset upon seeing another we think is not worthy to be there, and lose sight of the extravagance that has written our own invitation? Wouldn't it be better, Jesus is saying, to accept with great joy that we are there, and that our brothers and sisters are there, too?

For if all of the family is together at the party, then that must mean that old wounds have been healed. It must mean that forgiveness has won the day. It must mean that the lost have been found. It must mean that the family is family again. Knowing how our families can be, could there be anything better than such a party? I don't think so.

What a great party it will be in Paradise when we finally see face to face. In the meantime, let us embrace with joy the glimpses of God's extravagant grace we see from time to time, when the lost are found, when the blind come to see, when the broken is made whole, and when all is forgiven. It's hard to imagine ever having enough of those glimpses. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to Heather G. Shortlidge for this introduction, from "Introduction to the Lenten Texts: Fourth Sunday in Lent, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32," in *Journal for Preachers*, p. 6.