

Sermon for March 13, 2016 – “Grace First”

5th Sunday of Lent, Year C – Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

A Sunday school teacher had asked her class: “Who is most unhappy in the parable of the Prodigal Son?” From the back of the room, a little boy called out: “The fatted calf.”

With the possible exception of the one about the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son is probably the best known and best loved. From a preaching standpoint it has just about everything in it you could want, sin and redemption, grace and the refusal of grace and you can read it from several different perspectives; the father, the prodigal son, or that of the older brother. Indeed there’s a lot of theology to unpack in the parable and over the years preachers have looked to do so in all sorts of ways. One pastor gave a sixteen-week sermon series on it. After the sixteenth and final sermon a woman greeted the pastor as she exited the sanctuary and said, “I’m so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home.” Some think the story has become a bit **too** familiar for us.

One commentator argued a while back that the very familiarity of this parable poses a danger to our understanding of it. This is a story, he said, that “presents a picture of divine acceptance so radical and sweeping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and provoked sputtering outrage.” But in many churches today he goes on to argue we have heard the story so often that we miss its shock value. “There was a man who had two sons” the story begins and we know where this one’s going.

Today the story has all the bland predictability of a biblical theme park. The awful, relationship-shattering words, “Give me my share of the inheritance,” leave us unruffled. Why? Because we can already hear the musicians warming up for the party at the end. We aren’t troubled by the son’s anguished lament: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son”, because the aroma of the fatted calf roasting on the spit wafts over the narrative, and covers up the nasty stench of the pigsty. Fear not, the boy’s coming home. He always does. But the problem with this parable isn’t just the result of over-familiarity. Countless readings have transformed what was once a parable with trap doors and astonishing depth into something resembling one of Aesop’s fables. An anecdote with a simple moral tacked on at the end. Something like: “Hey, no matter how badly you have messed up life, pick yourself up. A ready supply of forgiveness is waiting, and you can start over where you left off.” The problem with such a take on the story is this, that this surprising, even shocking, story becomes instead a predictable bit of self-help advice. It assumes that once the prodigal has pulled himself together and heads home, the father’s obliged to throw a party for him upon his return. The celebration is “his due” for his turnaround. Read that way, what we get is a comforting and reassuring tale with absolute predictability. It’s not the shocking and surprising little parable that Jesus first told!

Now, the experts may be right. But I think this story still packs the power to shock and offend, because it speaks of grace, and not only does grace **have** the power to offend us today, but it **does** offend when it’s exercised. I think that what many people still want today, as ever is some assurance that right behavior and right belief still counts for something. And that’s fine, but the notion of **unmerited** grace still bothers many of us a great deal. Of course, the irony here is that grace, by definition, is unmerited.

I recall a discussion in seminary in a preaching class after someone had just given their sermon on this text. The sermon talked about grace, embracing the sinner and whether the prodigal’s sin was that of extravagant living or prideful self-righteousness. Several people said all the talk about grace made them uncomfortable. That grace (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer correctly argued) could be made cheap when not linked to repentance. One student candidly said that

generally speaking, he was ready for to stop hearing sermons about grace and start hearing sermons about repentance. After all, he said, repentance is always the precursor of grace. And I think that if you took a poll most people would agree. But here's the problem, there's not a single instance in the Gospels, when Jesus requires anyone's repentance **before** he extends grace or healing or hospitality. Not one! Think about that for a moment. What do we make of that? I don't know about you, but it seems to me then that repentance is a **response** to God's grace not a prerequisite for it. Grace always comes first.

I've spent some time researching the matter and, trust me, I've been unable to find an instance where repentance comes first. I believe grace precedes repentance. And I believe Jesus' parable of the prodigal son underlines that idea. I realize that on the surface it appears that repentance does come first in this parable. We hear that the younger son tired of his pig-sty diet comes to his senses and begins rehearsing his confession of sin and receives grace and forgiveness and welcome when he returns home to his father to speak that confession. But the movement of the story makes it clear that the grace of the father is pre-emptive and not just toward the younger son, toward the older son as well. One commentator wrote that "the prodigal is willful, foolish, self-centered, and self-indulgent. He comes home only when he has nowhere else to go. The older brother is petty, spiteful, jealous, self-righteous, and rather lacking in imagination. I think we should pity the poor father", says the scholar, "who has to live with this conspicuous vice and the even more conspicuous virtue. Perhaps he should've gone and left the place for the two of them to fight it out." But Dad did **not** run away because the story's not about the two sons, the story's about **him**. What's more, we know he **won't** run away. We know a great deal about Dad's character and his nature because of what his sons say and do.

The prodigal tells us the character of his father when he says at his lowest point: "I will arise and go to my father." He didn't expect the fatted calf but he knew enough to know that his father by his very nature, by his very character, **would not, could not**, disavow him. More than that, he knew that his father would be there to receive him. He knew that his father's nature was love and his knowledge was rewarded and returned. The older brother knew this as well but how do we know? We know, because it's on the basis of the father's love and sense of justice that he complains. And isn't it true that you only complain to someone in whose sense of justice you have confidence? Both sons presume upon what they know to be **there** and what they know to be **theirs**. And what is that? It's the unconditional love of the father for his children. This is the heart of the gospel and of Jesus' message. No one is too far gone, too low, or too bad to be removed from God's unconditional love and no one is too good, too dutiful, or too righteousness for that love. It's the nature of the Father to love those to whom he has given life. Some will notice that the prodigal son acknowledges his sins but it's not the confession that triggers the love – NO - It's the **father's love** that triggers the confession. So, yes, repentance is important. And in this parable of Jesus, we see that not only do both sons need to repent in order to enjoy life in their father's house, we see **where** they need to repent. Repentance for the prodigal son means learning to say "father" again and for the elder son it means learning to say "brother" again.

Repentance is crucial, multiple directions, if we're to find our way and enjoy God's blessings in this life. But is repentance the precondition for grace? No. Grace comes first. It seems logical to say that we confess our sins in order to receive God's grace. We repent of the wrong we've done and then God forgives us. That's always been the formula. But consider this, where'd we get the motivation to confess our sins in the first place? Isn't our desire to be right with God already evidence of God's grace at work in us, wooing us back to Him?

In his book, *Searching for Home*, M. Craig Barnes writes: “Grace precedes confession, guides it, and makes the movement [towards it] possible. The historical reality of what Christ did on the cross means that we confess our sins because God has already forgiven us. That is our only hope, the one we were not counting on, and the one that appears only after we have abandoned all others. So we do not confess in order to **receive** grace, but in order to **enjoy** it. If confession preceded grace, it would mean we deserve God’s mercy by our contrition. What we **deserve** is the last thing we **want**”. Not long ago, I read about a NYC social worker named Julio Diaz. The story said that Diaz followed the same routine every evening. He ended his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night a few weeks earlier as Diaz stepped off the train and onto a nearly empty platform his evening took an unexpected turn. He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached. Suddenly, he pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, “Hey, wait a minute, you forgot something. If you’re going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.” The young man looked at Diaz like he was crazy. He asked, “Why are you doing this?” Diaz replied, “Well, if you’re willing to risk jail for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all **I** wanted to do was get dinner. If you want to join me, hey, you’re more than welcome.” “I just felt maybe he really needed help,” Diaz said. The boy agreed, and they walked into the diner and sat in a booth. They weren’t there long, when the manager came by, followed by the dishwasher and then the other waiters. They all knew Diaz and wanted to say hello. The kid said. “You know everybody here. Do you own this place?” “No,” Diaz replied, “I just eat here a lot.” The boy responded, “But you’re even nice to the dishwasher.” “Well, haven’t you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?” Diaz asked him. “Yeah,” the boy said, “but I didn’t think people really acted that way.” The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. “He just had this sad face,” Diaz said. He couldn’t answer, or didn’t want to. When the bill came, Diaz told the teen, “Look, I guess you’re going to have to pay for this bill ‘cause you have my money and I can’t pay for it. “But if you give me my wallet back, I’ll gladly treat you.” The teen “didn’t even think about it” and handed over the wallet. Diaz then handed him \$20, figuring it might help him. But he also asked for something in return which the boy gave him. It was his knife.

You want to talk about amazing grace? This is it! Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing. Every so often if we’re paying attention, open to whatever God has in store for us, our own sinful, broken nature encounters God’s. We see how very far from God we really are. We see how very much in need of God we really are. And the undeniable, irresistible gift of grace that we experience compels us to respond in any number of ways. First and foremost, however, it should compel us to change the course of our lives and find our way back home to our heavenly Father. There are times, I know, when the repentance seems to come first. But that’s not what the parable of the Prodigal teaches us. And when we look closely at both the parable and the experiences of our lives we’ll find that it works the other way around. The truth is that grace once **demonstrated**, once **experienced** can change everything about us. Absolutely everything!!! Paul puts it best in his second letter to the church in Corinth. He said: **“For Christ’s love compels us...“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...not counting people’s sins against them.”**

Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen.