

Prodigal Grace

Sermon 137 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In many ways the Parable of the Prodigal Son is like a piece of art. It is a narrative masterpiece that seems simple enough at first, but as we twist and turn it, or allow it to twist and turn us, we notice different things, we see the story differently, and... if we're not careful, we also begin to see ourselves differently.

This is how we know it is a brilliant parable.

Look at it one way and all we can see is the embrace of the father. The son who took his inheritance early and squandered it all has returned and is desperate for a place at the table which he no longer deserves.

We've been there, a time or two. Making poor decisions, usually in the heat of the moment, without thinking it through. We've chosen instant gratification over slow-grown goodness. We've also been there in response to deep seated pain. You know the kind. It comes along when we least expect it and rips our whole world apart leaving us feeling desperate and hopeless. In those states we feel there is nothing to lose, no reason to stay the course, and so we run – like the son who ran away – to a foreign land and squander every bit of ourselves trying to soften the edges of our pain.

But sometimes, that's not our story. Sometimes we *do* do the right thing. We stay close to home, on the right path. We care for our loved ones and pull our weight in the family business – or more often the family system. We do our jobs with integrity and to the best of our abilities. We don't ask for more, we know that more will come when the time is right. So we just keep on plugging away. When we read this story, we see more than just the Father embracing the wayward son, we also see the older brother, the one who didn't make that offensive request, the one who stayed and didn't squander the inheritance. The one who waited, worried, and labored alongside the father. The one who did everything right and the one for whom no "return" was celebrated. There wasn't a need, he never left. So watching everyone get all excited about the return of his brother was hard. It made him feel jealous and angry.

Although the famous Rembrandt depiction of this parable shows the older son watching with disdain as the father embraces the son who has returned, in the Gospel itself, the older son learns of the news while he's out working the field. He gets angry and refuses to join the festivities. Like the sheep who has gone astray, now the older brother is the one distancing himself from the flock, from the family. And the father, much like the shepherd, leaves the crowd to find the older brother.

So which one is lost?

I always find it interesting how our bible translations label the sections of text – and how those labels direct our reading and interpretation. Luke 15 is a prime example of this. In

the Greek, there are no sub-headings. So, this is just another section of the Gospel According to Luke. The section begins with the set up:

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them...’”

Then Jesus tells them a parable in three parts: first, a lost sheep; second, a lost coin; and third a lost son. But my Bible doesn’t delineate the three parts in such a way. I wonder if yours is the same? Mine labels them: *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, *The Parable of the Lost Coin*, and *The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother*.

Where did that word prodigal come from? It’s not in the text. We were talking about lost-ness and found-ness and now we’re using a different word, *prodigal*.

What’s more, I don’t know about you, but prodigal isn’t a word I use in normal conversation. In fact, I’d wager that I really only use it when I’m talking about this story. So what does it mean? Where does it come from? And who (or what) is actually prodigal here?

Turns out, the word prodigal is a 16th century English word with Latin roots. In its earliest use, it described extravagance often to the point of being wasteful. By the 1590s the word was used to describe the younger son, the one who spent liberally and excessively, the one who squandered his wealth lavishly and without necessity.¹ The shoe fits, right?

But there’s another actor here, another character in the parable who could also wear that prodigal shoe. There is another extravagant spender, another who extends (perhaps overly so) lavishly and without necessity. There is another who seems to have no hesitation about investing in a lost cause. Do you see where this is going? By definition, the prodigal son isn’t the only prodigal here, he’s just the one who deals in money. There is another prodigal who deals in grace.

Just look at how the father welcomes the returning son – he spotted his son far on the horizon, he lifted up his robes and took off running toward his son (quite an undignified move). Then, without hearing or speaking a word, he greets his son with a hug and a kiss. Again, not the most typical greeting, given their recent history. As soon as he can open his mouth the son chimes in with a litany of confession, he names his unworthiness, his disrespectful behavior, and his awareness that he deserves nothing from the father... he just wants to work on the farm to earn a place – not as a son, but as a hired hand.

But the father, deals extravagantly with grace. He spends it lavishly and without necessity. He is not concerned with merit or history, all that matters is that the son is home. And he says as much when he notices the older son is missing from the party.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/prodigal>

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

It appears the case could be made that what we actually have is a story about two lost sons and a prodigal father. One who deals not in money or inheritance, but in grace.

Maybe this prodigal father knew the same thing Richard Rohr talks about when he says that grace increases by usage.² God gives each of us a little bit and then God hides to see if we will use it. And every time we do, he says, it keeps going a little further. And if we don't use the grace that God has given to us, then we do not understand grace at all and therefore we cannot allow grace to anyone else either.

God gives us each a little gift of grace, accepting us as we are with all of our flaws and imperfections, and then God hides to see if we will use it.

Before you write off the idea of this divine game of hide and seek, consider that Rohr isn't the first to describe God's activity in such a way. The mystics of the Medieval period wrote about it often saying: God is there, love is there... grace is there, but it is not always apparent, until you act on it.

There's a leap of faith involved.

One might even say, there is risk involved.

What happens if grace is extended and not reciprocated? What if it isn't appreciated or even received? What kind of investment is that for the giver?

If the Richard Rohr, the mystics, and St. Luke the Evangelist are right, it makes no difference at all.

Because once grace is given... it can't help but expand and multiply... doubling over its efforts and popping up in all kinds of unexpected and probably unsavory areas...

Grace is prodigal like that.

And if you or I hope to be regular players in this grace-full game of hide and seek then we might have to take the risk to “live ourselves into a new way of thinking” about this world and about our neighbors who live with us in it. Did you catch that? “Live ourselves into a new way of thinking” it's what Rohr says *grace* looks like in action. Rather than the conventional way of “thinking ourselves into a new way of living”, when we live ourselves into a new way of thinking we take risks and we can love those who we once thought unlovable, we can find solutions to problems we once thought unsolvable, we can welcome those we once thought we'd never feel at home with, we can understand those

² <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/cooperating-with-grace>

we have always struggled to understand, we can listen to those whose stories we'd made assumptions about we can finally expand in ways we never imagined possible recognizing that grace had been there all along, just waiting for us to see it, believe it, and live it.

Friends, this is the good news. It is good news for me. It is good news for you. It is good news for us and for all of our world because God knows we need a good measure of grace in this world to heal all that has become broken.

Whether we are lost or found, whether we have run from home as far as we can, or stayed our lives on the straight and narrow. Whether we have grown bitter and angry as others receive what they do not deserve, or whether we have squandered everything we had with poor decisions and for our personal satisfaction, it does not matter because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans says) so we might as well get real honest about who we are and the fact that it is only by the prodigal grace of God that we are here at all, in one piece, surrounded by the love of these sisters and brothers of faith who somehow, some way have found it within themselves to engage in the grace-full game of hide and seek, taking a risk on us and choosing to activate that grace – even though none of us really deserve it – but they (and perhaps we) keep on giving it a shot because somewhere along the way, maybe... just maybe we have learned that grace increases by usage.

Doesn't matter when, doesn't matter where, doesn't even matter with whom...

Grace is always there, and God is hiding nearby, ready to let it expand, and waiting to see what we will do. Maybe it's unnecessary. Maybe it's lavish. Maybe it's even prodigal.

But my, wouldn't that be amazing?