

March 27, 2022
“Prodigal Love”
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

In his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, which I've referenced as part of previous sermons and probably will again because it's such a great resource, the Irish teacher and poet, John O'Donohue, offers a section of blessings related to homecoming of one kind or another.

There's one short blessing he calls, “Come Home to Yourself,” and it goes like this:

*May all that is unforgiven in you
be released.*

*May your fears yield
their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is un-lived in you
blossom into a future
graced with love.*

A future graced with love.

We're talking today about love, Calvary. And we're talking about grace. It's what Jesus is talking about in the reading from Luke, as Gerry just shared with us.

It may be, for some of you, a familiar story. A story about a father and his two sons.

The younger son begs for his inheritance and goes out on his own, far, far away from home, and proceeds to squander everything. Wastes it all on what our translation calls “dissolute living.” That's a gentle way of putting it. His older brother puts it less gently toward the end of the story. We'll get to that.

With nothing left, and now in the midst of a national famine, the younger son is beyond desperate. He takes the only job he can find, feeding pigs – and finds himself so hungry that he's jealous of the pigs.

But then he “came to himself,” the text says, and reminds himself that even his father’s hired hands had more to eat than he does now – and with bread enough even to share. His mouth is watering just thinking about it, so he decides to return home. Even rehearsing the “I’m not worthy” speech he’ll give his father when he gets there.

“The speech he hopes,” as Frederick Buechner puts it, “will soften the old man’s heart enough so that at least he won’t slam the door in his face.”

To be clear, this is not a change of heart. Not yet at least. As Buechner further suggests, “There is nothing edifying about his decision. There is no indication that he realizes he’s made an ass of himself and broken his old man’s heart, no indication that he thinks of his old man as anything more than a meal ticket. There is no sign that he is sorry for what he’s done or that he’s resolved to make amends somehow and do better next time. He decides to go home for the simple reason that he knows he always got three squares a day at home, and for a man who is in danger of starving to death, that is reason enough.”

So he heads home, and when he’s still a ways off, BEFORE he has a chance to give his speech, his father spots him. You get the sense that his father’s been on the lookout for him, keeping daily vigil. When he sees him, he doesn’t even wait for his son to come to him. He can’t wait; he’s too excited!

So he runs, he RUNS! Picture this father running down the road so he can wrap his son up in his arms and kiss him. Which he does. Picture it.

Buechner, again, writes: “. . . the old man doesn’t do what any other father under heaven would have been inclined to do. He doesn’t say he hopes he has learned his lesson or I told you so. He doesn’t say he hopes he is finally ready to settle down for a while and will find some way to make it up to his mother. He just says, ‘Bring him something to eat, for God’s sake. Bring him some warm clothes to put on,’ and when the boy finally manages to slip his prepared remarks in edgewise, the old man doesn’t even hear them he’s in such a state. All he can say is the boy was dead and is alive again. The boy was lost and is found again.”

Picture this father running down the road as fast as his old legs will carry him so he can wrap his son up in his arms and kiss him.

THIS is the very picture of grace. THIS is the very picture of love.

Anne Lamott writes that grace is “the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love—the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you.”

Now it’s important that we not lose sight of the context here, the context in which Jesus shares this particular parable.

Jesus is hanging out, as we know he often does, with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors singled out here, and repeatedly throughout the gospels, as those Jews who worked on behalf of Rome, the foreign oppressor and occupier. A particularly egregious sin among the Jewish community.

Jesus is hanging with tax collectors and sinners, and guess who’s not happy about it? The finger-pointing Pharisees and scribes, the keepers of the law and tradition. The religious zealots. What else is new?

“This fellow welcomes sinners,” they say, and not only that, he “eats with them.”
Imagine!

So THIS parable, the so-called “Parable of the Prodigal Son” (prodigal meaning wasteful), this parable is how Jesus responds. Actually, it’s the third parable Jesus offers in response to the religious grumbling. What our lectionary reading for today skips over is first, the “Parable of the Lost Sheep,” the one where Jesus suggests that if you were a shepherd who had 100 sheep and you lost one, you would surely leave the 99 to go and find that one, and then rejoice with your friends and neighbors when you do.

And then the “Parable of the Lost Coin,” in which a woman who has 10 coins loses one, turns the house upside down to find it, and when she does, throws a PARTY to celebrate.

“Just so,” Jesus concludes after each of these parables, “I tell you, there is joy in heaven, in the presence of the angels, over one sinner who repents.” This is the picture of grace. This is the picture of love.

And it’s the point of all three parables when you get down to it, the point he’s making to the Pharisees and scribes and anyone who will listen and understand.

The rush to grace, not judgment, IS the point. The instinct for inclusion, not exclusion, is the point. Every sheep, every coin, matters.

The grace of God is a PERPETUAL, UNCONDITIONAL invitation to wholeness. That doesn’t mean it’s cheap, to borrow Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s description, that it requires nothing of us. Grace comes without condition, but not without accountability. The wholeness grace offers is offered no matter what, no strings attached; but WHOLENESS to be experienced, lived, requires us to turn toward it, to step into it. That’s repentance. That’s discipleship. That’s accountability to God, to each other, to ourselves.

Grace is the ongoing invitation to COME HOME, again and again and again and again and again and again – to God, to each other, to ourselves. To love. To a “future graced with love.”

Grace is the hug offered, given, even if you don’t hug back. WHOLENESS is the mutual embrace.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber describes grace, God’s grace, this way: “. . . not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God’s grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word ... it’s that God makes beautiful things out of even my own shit.”

Grace finds beauty and goodness in everything – that's how Bono sings it in the U2 song called *Grace*. “Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.”

And Bolz-Weber continues: “Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace – like saying, ‘Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive you.’ It's God saying, ‘I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.’”

And the newness, the wholeness, that God is after on our behalf, as Jesus makes clear with these parables and elsewhere, is not just individual. He makes the point again and again and again and again, that we are not ALL of us whole until we are EACH of us whole. And likewise, we are not EACH of us whole until we are ALL of us whole.

This is the grace we see in the picture of the father running to embrace his son. The parable begins with the prodigal, the recklessly wasteful, younger son, and then turns our attention to the PRODIGAL father modeling PRODIGAL love for his son who was lost, but now is found, who was dead but is alive again. Affirming that the family is not whole without him.

Prodigal also means generous, excessive, extravagant. This is grace. This is generous, excessive, extravagant, even wasteful divine love meeting us exactly where we are on the road.

So it's appropriate to focus our attention on the father's response, offering his son a future graced with love. The father throws a party. A big one. He spares no expense in the celebration. The best robe. A fatted calf.

But the parable doesn't stop with the party. Grace doesn't stop with the party. From the younger son to the father and then to the elder son. Unlike his father, he does not feel like celebrating his brother's return. He's pissed.

“For all these years,” he complains to his father, “I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate. . . . But when this son of yours (hear that: not this BROTHER OF MINE but this SON OF YOURS) came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” He does not hide his resentment. It's natural and understandable. It's NOT fair. We get it.

But this, again, is not a story about fairness. It's a story about grace and love. PRODIGAL grace and love.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” In other words, your future is no less graced with my love. The father doesn't scold him for his resentment, he simply reminds him of his BELONGING. The grace that met the younger brother where he was also meets the older brother where he is.

“But we had to celebrate and rejoice,” we HAD to celebrate and rejoice, there was no CHOICE involved for the father, “because this brother of yours (and now hear that deliberate turn: not this SON OF MINE but this BROTHER OF YOURS) was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The father points his older son back toward wholeness, for himself and in relationship with his brother. How I respond to MY SON is my business; how you respond to YOUR BROTHER is yours.

The question the older son has to face is how much he values his brother, how much he's willing to sacrifice for reconciliation, and how much he would rather be right than be in right relationship. How much he'd rather be right than whole.

The divine grace we all receive and experience as perpetual, unconditional invitation is the same grace we are invited to extend, even to those we don't think deserve it.

And God knows there are PLENTY of people, amen!, we don't think deserve such grace, such love. We ARE the older son in the parable, resentful of the grace given others because resentment is easier. Already found without realizing it.

And God knows there are plenty of times when we don't think or feel that WE deserve such grace, such love. We ARE also the younger son in the parable, losing sight of and throwing away the grace given to us. Lost but, deep down, longing to be found.

The good news, the beauty and gift, of grace, is that it operates outside our predictable, dichotomous framework of deserving and undeserving. "Outside karma," as Bono and U2 describe it in the same song, *Grace*. A Rumi poem also comes to mind: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

That's precisely where God meets us.

Divine grace is about wholeness, individual and collective wholeness. The perpetual, unconditional invitation to all of us, to come home, to repent and turn back again and again and again and again and again – to God, to each other, to ourselves.

"Grace is not a strange, magic substance which is subtly filtered into our souls to act as a kind of spiritual penicillin," writes the Christian mystic, Thomas Merton. "Grace is unity, oneness with ourselves, oneness with God."

The father's GRACE-ful response to both of his sons is at the heart of this parable. In fact, we ONLY get the father's response; we're not told how either son responds to their father. And so it's as if, in sharing this parable, Jesus is reminding all who would listen and understand that THEY are the rest of the story.

WE are the rest of God's story of prodigal, generous, excessive, extravagant, wasteful grace and love, grace and love that makes beautiful things out of even our own and each other's shit.

"I do not at all understand the mystery of grace," writes Anne Lamott, "only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." Thanks be to God! The rest is up to us.

So hear and receive again that blessing, the invitation to come home to yourself, to come home:

*May all that is unforgiven in you
be released.*

*May your fears yield
their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is unlived in you
blossom into a future
graced with love.*

Friends, may all that is unlived in all of us blossom into a future – both individual and collective – graced with love and marked by wholeness.

May it be so.