

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 30, 2025

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Theme: Found by God's scandalous grace. Will we grumble or celebrate?

In our gospel for today the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling because they found Jesus' behavior offensive. Not only did Jesus seem to care about the least, the outcasts, the sinners (those who violated holiness codes) but he actually embraced and welcomed them to the table, his table, God's table.

Instead of toning it down, defending his actions, Jesus pushes the envelope even further by telling them a parable – what we have come to know as the story of the Prodigal Son. Do you ever wonder why it is called the parable of the prodigal son? The word “prodigal” means to be wastefully extravagant, giving lavishly and foolishly, even scandalously. But why did the younger son's actions, squandering his property in dissolute living – become the title of the whole parable? This story begins by telling us “There was a **man** (father) who had two sons.” While this is a well-known parable, there was a time when the lectionary (the assigned Scriptures readings for each Sunday) known to most churches of the west did not include the parable of the prodigal son at all. Eventually it was assigned as an alternative gospel reading in the season after Pentecost and then in the three-year revised common lectionary developed in 1992, it became a regular gospel in the season of Lent.

This bit of history because it makes me wonder why this parable wasn't included from the very beginning. The more I thought about it, the more I saw this this beloved, well-known parable is one of the more challenging parables Jesus told, with a dangerous or at least very unsettling message to the church. I would argue that this is a story about the father, not the sons, and it is the father who is prodigal, wastefully extravagant in the grace he gives to both of his sons. In other words, this is a story about God's grace and God's grace is not easy to accept, let alone live. God's grace is scandalous. Which begs the question for us when this grace finds us, will we grumble or celebrate? And that is the theme of my sermon – Found by God's scandalous grace, will we grumble or celebrate? s.

Lost and found. The previous two parables Jesus' tells in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes are about a lost sheep and a lost coin. And now here we have

the story of a son who was lost when he left his father to go squander his wealth in dissolute living. But in all three of these parables what really stands out is not the actions or inactions of the lost items (coin, sheep, son) but the incredible effort the woman, shepherd, father will go to find the lost, never giving up until the lost is found and restored. When something, someone is lost it is tempting to first focus on them – being lost – rather than being found. But let's change that and start by focusing on what it means to be found, on the father in this parable who as I said is really the subject of this story.

No self-respecting Jewish father would ever act like the father in our parable. Think about it – the younger son is incredibly disrespectful to his father. His request for his part of the inheritance is way out of line, perhaps the equivalent of wishing his father were dead. The son could have expected a share of the family estate, a much smaller piece than that due to the elder son, but only upon his father's death. No father would ever be expected to honor that request. Not only does the father give the son his inheritance before his death, but when the son finally returns, the father's behavior gets worse – running to greet his son when he returns home after blowing his inheritance with **compassion!** Instead of meeting his son with a disappointment and a speech, "I knew you would blow it. It is time for you to grow up and earn your place back into the family," the father kisses him and throws him a party!

That is not the way things are supposed to work. That is not fair as the older son points out. A common understanding of fairness is the idea that what and how you contribute to a situation directly relates to what you receive. If I work hard, I'll be fairly compensated and successful. If I am lazy or irresponsible, I'll fail. If I honor and serve my father, I'll be rewarded with his love and approval. If I dishonor him, I'll be punished. But the father in the parable models a love that cannot be contained by fairness—a love that is not deserved or earned, but freely given only because of the loving heart of the father; because we have a God who we cannot understand from a human point of view, as we hear in 2 Corinthians. We have a God who finds us with grace that is nothing less than scandalous.

The father in the parable finds his older son with the same grace, even though he is grumbling about the treatment his younger brother gets. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” All that is mine is yours – could I love you more than that? Can God love us any more than giving all God has – God’s own son to embrace us, despite our entitlement, our arrogance, our squandering, our messes, our resentment. That is grace. And that is what God invites us into time and time again, because that is how we experience the joy and abundance of life – the party that God wants all of us to find.

That is the invitation of Lent – even though we don’t often associate this season with celebration. Grace enables us to do the hard work of confession, being honest about our own sins, all the ways we have let down God and others, all the ways we have wasted, lost opportunities to act as children of God. The younger son wanted what he wanted now, to do what he wanted, to live how he wanted without recognition that he was part of a family, a larger community. Equating greatness with economic wealth, it is all about me, rather than finding compassion and generosity toward others seems to be a theme in our society these days. We can get lost, caught up in pursuing our own interests that we don’t realize the harm we are doing to others and ourselves. But just as the younger son in the parable, eventually “came to himself” so the season of Lent invites us to “come to ourselves,” seeing now only how we have messed up but how much we need God’s grace.

Grace also enables us to be honest about the ways in which we are like the older son, resentful and bitter because while his younger brother was off having a good time, he stayed at home and worked hard. For all our talk about grace in the Lutheran church, we still think of salvation as something we earn. We often see ourselves as deserving more than those people who mess up so obviously (never mind owing our own messes), who don’t believe or behave in the ways we think they ought to. We are much more comfortable making judgements on others rather than owning our own stuff; much more comfortable making rules and laws than extending mercy. The resentment that the older son has – that is our resentment; and that resentment is not just directed at the younger son. It is directed at the father. Could it be that it is actually grace, the way God gives grace, that we resent?

You will notice that the gospel story doesn't really have a resolution, an ending. We don't know if the older brother comes to the party. We don't know if the younger son turns his life around and starts being a good son. All we know is that the father throws a party. The father is absolutely overjoyed that his son is alive and that his son is home. God keeps finding us and brings us home so that we can truly live.

I really don't think we get how incredibly radical and transforming and countercultural and powerful this grace is; even dangerous because it upends our agendas and judgements and divisions to proclaim that we are all beloved children. For someone who has messed up so bad – to hear, to know that they are loved and valued, that they are worth a party – that is huge. For someone who is so resentful and angry that they don't even want to engage in a relationship – to hear to know that they are loved and valued, that God gives God's own self to them, that they are worth a party – that is huge. So, we can keep grumbling – there is a lot to grumble about these days. Or we can celebrate and live God's grace which calls us to honesty, to repentance, to compassion, to joy. What do you think the world needs more of these days? Amen