

“Priceless grace”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Luke 15: 1-32

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Today’s Good News gives us three related parables. But consider what we have done to the names of the parables: the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Why not name them the parables of the found sheep, the found coin, and the loving father? After all, all three parables end in celebration.

The famous theologian and writer, Henri Nouwen, visited St. Petersburg a few years ago. While there he saw Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. It was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Nouwen stood for two hours, mesmerized. As the sun changed, the painting changed. At every change of the light’s angle he saw a different aspect of the painting. He would later write: “There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day.”

Just as Henri Nouwen saw a half dozen facets to Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son, so too are there many different angles to the story itself. This parable fascinates us because it resonates with our life experiences. Adolescent rebellion, alienation from family, appeal of foreign places and ways, the consequences of foolish living, the remembered warmth of home, the experience of spiritual awakening and repentance, the joy of reunion, the power of forgiveness, and the contrast of relationships based on merit and relationships based on faithful love.

But we have heard the story of the Prodigal Son so many times we believe that we have squeezed it dry. Not only that, but, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. When we hear the opening words of the parable once again, “And there was a man who had two sons,” we greet the words with ho-hum. Heard that before.

Yes, on one level this is a story about repentance. We hurt someone, and God calls us to make amends. On a deeper level, it is about reconciliation. Someone hurts us in what I call a hit and run, runs away, then comes back to beg forgiveness, and the response God wants is for us to run out to them to accept them back. I say this is a deeper level because sometimes it is more difficult to accept an apology than to ask for forgiveness. But for me there is yet another even deeper level. Some commentators say the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are a set up for the parable of the Prodigal younger Son. But I think the story of the Prodigal younger son is a set up for the story of the

prodigal OLDER son. So let's look at the parable of the prodigal son one more time.

Scripture reading

Scene 1: We understand ourselves best in the dialectic.

There was a man who had two sons. Do you find yourself in this parable? Are you the rebellious younger son who values his rights more than his relationships, who runs from his father's table, but then repents and returns? From a distance, the "far" country can be very appealing. Young people leave home for fast living. Spouses move out to liaison with exciting new partners. But they discover the glow that surrounds the far country is a mirage. As with Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, it is only when we are in the land of far far away that we say, "There is no place like home." Pride can keep us from admitting our mistakes. So we have to face ourselves in the pig pen of our own making before we can face our God. We come to ourselves, we get up out of the pig pen, and we return. This is repentance. We have a spiritual awakening, as described in Ezekiel, we come to ourselves, we get up, and we return.

If you are not the younger son, are you the forgiving father whose unconditional love includes both sons? It is hard to be forgiving. Our temptation is to make a child or friend's separation reciprocal. We respond in kind to how we ourselves are treated. But not the father in this parable. And not God. No matter what the son has done, he is still his parent's child. Love requires no penance. The father's joy begins as soon as the son's silhouette appears on the horizon. In ancient Palestine, it is unbecoming for a grown man to run. But the father sets aside concern for propriety and runs. The father runs to meet his son even before he can give his confession voice. No penance is required. Repentance, yes. Penance, no. Oops! Is this cheap grace? Can you hear his neighbors muttering? We don't believe in cheap grace, or do we?

Or are you the older son who tries to live up to a parent's dreams, who tries to live up to God's expectations, but who then feels jealous and ignored? The older brother thinks he can make it on his own. He is proud of the kind of life he has lived. He lives by justice and merit, and does not suffer kindly those who must ask for forgiveness. He has worked not as a hired hand, but as a slave. Never has he received the fatted goat to celebrate with his friends. But the "bad" child is rewarded simply for coming home, when no other option was left to him anyway.

So who are you in this story? The younger son, the father, or the older son?

Scene 2: The father loves both sons equally

At the request of the YOUNGER son, the father divides his property. Without recrimination, the father gives his rebellious younger son the traditional 1/3 portion, saving the traditional 2/3 portion for the joint estate belonging to his older son and to himself. Without a peep of advice. Without saying to him, "If you

leave now you can never come back.” Without saying to him, “Since you reject me, I reject you.” He divides his estate and lets his younger son go. Surely the younger son knows his departure will rip out his old man’s heart. But he is not focused on his father. He is focused on “me, myself, and I.” Feeding pigs and eating their food is shameful for a Jewish boy. And the bean pod of the carob plant is bitter and has no nutrients. The younger son comes to his senses, arises, and returns. And his father comes running out to him when he is yet a long way off. But Ellsworth Kalas, who writes the Scripture from the Backside series, says this is not the climax of the story.

Surely the OLDER son knows that by staying outside the party given for his brother, that this will rip out his father’s heart. But he is not focused not on his father. He is focused on “me, myself, and I.” So his father leaves the party and comes out to him. The older son says to his father, “What have you ever given to me?” Jesus’ audience knows exactly what has been given to him. The older son got 2/3s of the property at the time of distribution, and the opportunity to continue living with and working with such a loving parent. But sometimes, Kalas says, it is easier to have a spiritual awakening, as described in Ezekiel, in one of life’s pigpens than in the lap of luxury. The father says to the older son, “Everything I have is yours. But your younger brother has returned home, and it is time to party.” Kalas says this is the true climax of the story of the Prodigal son. What the father says to the oldest son, not what he says to the youngest son. “Everything I have is yours, and you are always with me.”

There is a Jewish story of the hard working farmer. The story goes that God appears to this farmer and grants him three wishes, on the condition that whatever God does for the farmer will be given double to his neighbor. So the farmer first wishes for a hundred cattle. He is very pleased when he looks out his window and sees one hundred cattle in his field. Until he sees that his neighbor now has two hundred cattle. So he wishes for a hundred acres on which to graze his cattle, and is pleased to enlarge his farm. Until he sees that his neighbor now has two hundred acres. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the hard working farmer feels jealous and slighted because his neighbor has more than he. Finally, he makes his third wish, that God will strike him blind in one eye. And God weeps.

These three parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, expose the grudging human spirit that prevents us from receiving God’s joy. They tell us there is no ringing of bells in heaven when someone “Gets what he deserves.” I believe it is not God’s desire that we celebrate the misfortune of others, even if it appears they brought their misfortune upon themselves. I believe these parables tell us only when we can celebrate God’s unconditional love, mercy, and forgiveness toward OTHERS, only then can we ourselves experience joy. Only then can we join the heavenly party.

The father does not just have two sons, he loves two sons, he goes out to two sons, and is generous to two sons. This is hard for us to understand. Because our culture tells us where there are winners there must be losers. Even within the church, we think of Jews or Gentiles, poor or rich, saint or sinner, younger son or older son. But God’s love is both/and, not either/or. The embrace

of the younger son does not mean the rejection of the older son. Jesus' love for tax collectors and sinners does not negate love for Pharisees and scribes. Such is God's love.

Scene 3: There is a place at the table for both sons

It is obvious that the younger son is wasting his life away with drunken parties and so forth. He is wasting his life away with a flourish. In the end he spends all his money and resorts to living with and eating with pigs. Then he comes to his senses, and the YOUNGER brother dares to come to his father's table. But the older brother is wasting his life away also, isn't he? Not as obviously and dramatically. But just as harmfully and tragically. While the younger brother wastes his life away in crude riotous living, the older brother wastes his life away in mean, small, selfish living. When speaking to his father, he says, "this son of yours," not acknowledging he has a brother. And he does not acknowledge all his father has done for him. So he distances himself from both his brother and his father.

Along with the neighbors, he accuses his father of cheap grace. Grace. Like the advertisement says, the older son believes, "We earn it!" Well, lets think about that a minute. Isn't it he, the older brother, who cheapens grace? When we think we can earn God's grace, aren't we cheapening Jesus' sacrifice? It is the older son's understanding of grace that is cheap, thinking he can earn it on top of what Jesus has already done. And it is his father's notion of grace that is priceless. For if we have to earn grace, why did Jesus sacrifice himself 2000 years ago? That was not cheap grace. That was priceless grace. Penance is not necessary. It is enough that his younger son has come home. Like the sheep and the coin, the younger son was lost but now is found. Jesus' parable invites us to trust that God's forgiveness and mercy will be at least as great as that of a loving human parent. At least as great as that moment of priceless grace 2000 years ago.

But the OLDER brother was so angry that he was taken for granted, he would not come to the table with his brother, so like his younger brother before him, his father came out to him also.

Grace. We are not told if the OLDER brother ever came to his senses or not, or whether he ever came to the table or not.

I think this is not an accident. Jesus is a story teller. I think that as a good story teller, every nuance has a purpose for its presence or absence. I think the reason we are left hanging on the issue of the decision of the older son is that Jesus' audience is the older son's of our world, and Jesus did not presume to tell his audience what their decision is going to be.

How much more is God's love like this? God does not presume to tell you what you are going to decide. But regardless whether you reject God's invitation to table, a place is set for you with your name on it. I believe God's sovereign power is in sovereign love, not sovereign coercion. Sovereign inviting love. Rejection of God's love does not mean God retracts it. There is a place at God's table with your name on it. You can eat bitter carob pods with the pigs, or you

can sit at God's table. You can wallow outside with the older son in the bitterness of self-righteousness, or you can come inside to the inclusive table offered by God. But any table other than God's is not as nutritious or tasty. Any table other than God's will leave you as spiritually hungry as if you had eaten bitter carob pods.

Conclusion

Will you come to table and welcome the undeserving? Or, like the older son, and like Jesus' audience of Pharisees and scribes, will you stay away from table fellowship, pouting and feeling wronged? Whatever you decide, God patiently waits. Remember the words of the father in Jesus' parable: "All that is mine is yours. You are always with me."

Let us pray: Creating, reconciling, and inspiring God, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood us with your spirit and love. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that all our life may only be a radiance of your son, Jesus. Shine through us and be so in us that everyone with whom we come in contact may feel your presence in us. Let them look up and see no longer us but only Jesus. Stay with us and then we shall begin to shine as you shine, shine as to be a light to others. And all God's people say ... (Amen.)