

Gospel Lesson: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-23

The Joy of Grace

Rev. Tom Hagood

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I'm one of those kinds of drivers who likes to talk to other drivers ... you know ... tell them how they should be driving. You might say I'm the driving police ... the Pharisee on wheels ... when there are no police around to catch an offender blatantly breaking a rule of the road right there in front of my eyes. No kidding ... ride around with me and you'll see.

I might be in deep conversation with you and suddenly a sentence will spill from my mouth ... "Oh, I didn't know turn signals were optional in Georgia." ... or "What part of No Turn On Red don't you understand?" ... or there's the classic, "If I had known you owned the road, I would gladly have let you cut me off."

You see, when I spot those kind of drivers out there ... I want some immediate justice. I want their deliberate act of recklessness brought before the judge right then and now and the book thrown at 'em. Of course, I always follow the rules of the road. When the sign says STOP ... I come to a complete stop. When the sign says Yield ... I yield. And I always use my blinker well in advance of turning.

I follow the rules and I expect everyone else to do the same thing. There are no excuses for breaking the law on purpose. I don't believe in grace for bad driving ... just take away their license.

Unfortunately, the same things were being said by a group of Pharisees eavesdropping on Jesus. No, they weren't criticizing his chariot driving ... but they were talking under their breath about his association with tax collectors and sinners ... the very folk who blatantly broke the religious laws. How could he sit in their presence and share a meal? Just his association with these outcasts of society is unlawful ... and yet he sits and shares a meal with them ... one of the most intimate acts of hospitality in the ancient world.

No ... this won't do ... this is wrong ... there is no grace for his sins or theirs ... strict justice is needed ... and it's needed now. And Jesus ... who hears what they are saying ... who hears what I say and think and who looks into my heart ... and yours, too ... tells us a parable. Listen for the words of our Lord ... from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. I will be reading with the accompaniment of the choir.

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

15:3 So he told them this parable:

15:11b "There was a man who had two sons.

15:12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

15:13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

15:14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

15:16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

15:17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

15:18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

15:20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

15:21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

15:22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

15:23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

15:24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

15:25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

15:26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

15:27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

15:28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

15:29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years 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 with my friends.

15:30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

15:31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

15:32 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.'"

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Let's see ... which character haven't I preached about in this parable . . .there are the two sons ... no, preached about both of them. There's the father. No ... I've done him a couple of times, too. I know ... I'll tell you about the prodigal cow! No ... I'm not ... and I'm not going to try to be cute this morning and put a special spin on our scripture reading ... which for many of us is known as the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I suspect for most of you, this parable is quite well known as well as being quite well preached. Young son dishonors his father, takes an early inheritance and heads off to squander his fortune while Father waits anxiously at home for his return. Young son finally comes to his senses ... returns to the father who openly embraces him while older son sulks in the background because he feels cheated. End of story.

The fact is ... there is absolutely no reason to try and change this story and make it something that it isn't. As someone once said, to change this story would be like changing the formula of Coke or even Grandma's chocolate chip recipe ... as many times as you hear this story ... we need to hear its truth over and over ... because, for me, that truth is one of the hardest realities Jesus lays on me to live up to in all the Gospels.

The truth of this parable is hard for me to accept. Everything that happens in the first half of this story goes against all society and cultural norms of Jesus' time. No father would ever put up with a son who talked to him like that. He would have been considered dead by the father from the moment he stepped out of line and demanded his inheritance. Because for a son to ask for his share of the inheritance while his father was alive ... was to look the father in the eye and tell him ... you're dead in my eye ... and if you're dead ... I want what's coming to me.

Anyone hearing this story would have been scratching his head. This just doesn't happen. They would want the son stoned to death. That son should have been kicked out the door and never heard from again. And if you think about it ... same thing would probably happen today. But you've got to remember ... this isn't just a story about a rebellious child ... it's a story meant to be heard by those fuming Pharisees. It's a story meant for their ears.

It's a story that stands right between the great divide of law and grace. The heart of this story is the reaction of the father when his son has recognized his sin and returns to the father. The picture of a loving father running to meet his son is a picture of pure, unconditional love ... the love that only

our Savior can bring us.

Where we would expect the law to take over and the door to be slammed in his face, the father rejoices that his son ... dead to the rest of the world ... unforgiven by the rest of the world ... has returned. And where the law would merit punishment and retribution ... grace brings joy and gladness. Where Jesus sits with the sinners ... the tax collectors ... the outcast ... the lepers ... the prostitutes ... the forgotten ... and breaks bread ... because they have heard and they have responded to God's grace ... there is only joy ... the joy of a Father who loves and relishes when the lost comes home ... when what was dead is now alive.

The Pharisees experience none of that joy ... as their ears burn with anger.

The older son cannot accept what his father has done. He is trapped by the law ... the same law that traps the Pharisees. The law demands justice ... swift justice ... with all the proper penalties to be applied. But Jesus takes that world view and turns it on its head ... and pours out grace upon the one who was lost and is now found.

But ... be honest now. . . just like the older son, we really don't like what Jesus is saying, either. Even as Christians ... Christians taught since Sunday School Kindergarten and Vacation Bible School and Adult Lessons and whatever else we might have done to learn the words and lessons of Christ ... we don't like that idea that someone who does something so vile and hateful can ever be truly accepted ... or changed ... or forgiven ... or honored with joy by Christ. It's just not fair.

It's not how the rules of this world are measured. We just don't believe someone can actually change and become something new ... just as those Pharisees would never accept those sinners and tax collectors back into the fold of the Jewish religion.

We don't want grace for the child murderer ... or the rapist ... or the terrorist ... or the young student who shoots other students ... or the governor or neighbor who cheats on his wife or her husband ... we don't want grace for those kind of people. We don't want grace for the man who swindles our grandparents out of their life savings ... we don't want to hear it. I certainly don't.

We don't want grace for the friend who tells a secret they swore they'd keep ... we don't want grace for the ugly words said to our face in sudden anger ... we want justice ... the law demands justice and we want our pound of flesh. The last thing we want is to celebrate with joy the simple words that someone is sorry ... even if they do mean it. But why is that?

Why do we have such a hard time rejoicing at the news of someone who was lost and is now found ... someone who claims to have changed because Jesus Christ has turned them around and claimed them and forgiven them? Why is that so hard for us? Why are we so cynical?

Why do we always want to assume the worse about someone ... to never change our opinion or feelings about someone ... and to point our fingers and whisper under our breath? Why are we like that even when Jesus is not? Maybe it's because, as someone pointed out ... "The older son lacked joy. He took no joy in the tasks he performed for his father. He failed to sense the joy in his father's own heart, the generosity of spirit that marked the man. And hence he never even asked to throw a party for his friends. Maybe he had no friends!

But even if he did, he was too joyless himself to ever even think of a party. Maybe he was also stingy, not wanting to have even one goat fewer. You would not be at all surprised to hear this older son thinking to himself, “Yeah right! Like I’d waste a perfectly good goat on my lousy friends! When was the last time they had me over, eh!?”

He lacked joy. He lacked (energy). He lacked a celebratory spirit. Life for him was duty and drudgery, suspicion of his father’s motives and a pinched attitude toward that which was indeed his.” *Scott Hoezee, The Lectionary Gospel, Luke, Year C, calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek*

Maybe we do sometimes look at life as drudgery ... maybe we do feel that we law-abiding ones are the only pure and innocent and decent people in the world and we’re sick and tired of being told that we’ve got to forgive and celebrate with joy when someone turns their life around. Maybe so. But I believe he was more of a Pharisee – always following the rules, but self-righteous, no grace for himself or anyone else. And that’s just how people get sometimes.

But you see ... the whole point of the Parable of the Prodigal ... is that Christ never stops calling for the lost to come home ... no matter what someone has done ... and when someone does ... there is pure joy ... it is the joy that can only happen when God’s grace is experienced and felt ... and we are called to share that same joy ... to rejoice when the lost do come home ... to throw a party and kill the fattened calf and put on the fancy coat and the ring and celebrate and revel in the joy of God’s grace.

Because there can be no grace ... until the dead come home ... until the prodigal comes home. And there can be no joy except through God’s grace.

And if I stop and take off my police badge for just a moment and put away my judgmental attitude ... I, too, realize that I have played the role of the younger son before ... the one who was dead ... the one who had to come to his senses ... the one who had to stop and turn his life around.

And if I remember correctly ... when I finally came to my senses ... when I did return ... when I was welcomed back into the arms of the Jesus Christ and God’s grace was pouring into my life ... it was only then that I, with my Lord, experienced immense joy ... a joy unlike anything I have ever experienced. Did I deserve it ... no. Was I thrilled and overwhelmed to receive it. You bet I was.

Let us pray:

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls
and bid resentment cease.

Then, bound to all in bonds of love,
our lives will spread your peace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**