



“Amazing Grace”

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

“There was a man who had two sons.” So begins one of the most famous stories ever told: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. The story is considered a “paragon of Jesus’ parables” and an epitome of the good news Jesus preached. It is the Christian gospel wrapped in a story.

Jesus taught in parables. A parable is an extended metaphor or simile drawn from ordinary life that arrests the hearer by its vividness and leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise meaning, teasing us into further reflection.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of several parables about the grace of God. That grace lies at the center of Jesus’ life and teaching and stands at the heart of the biblical faith in both its Jewish and Christian forms. Grace is difficult to wrap our minds around, not only because it is a concept usually described as an abstract idea, but – more significantly – God’s grace is contrary to all our conventional notions about how life is supposed to work. Hence, grace is easily lost in the life of the church and, it seems, must be rediscovered in every generation.

God’s grace was lost in Jesus’ day, buried beneath a set of complex religious obligations and, as is usually the case, obscured by the blinders of conventional religious notions. The consequence, then as now, was a warped vision of God – a God created by human imagination rather than the God revealed in Scripture.

God is not like most people imagine, Jesus declared. Just before telling about the Prodigal, Jesus told two parables about God: in the first, God is like a woman who loses a valuable coin, and in the second, God is like a shepherd who loses a valuable lamb.

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons.”

This father and his sons were partners in a typical family business of the time. They owned and operated a farm. The sons had everything they needed in life, including a secure future.

But the younger son felt he was missing something in his life. Life on the farm seemed confining and boring. He dreamed of the lights and excitement of the big city out there beyond the farm. He was weary of his father’s rules and all the family obligations. He didn’t want safety and security. He wanted excitement and freedom. He chaffed at the restrictions of the family religion and longed to be free of it all. He longed to see the world and to experience all the forbidden fruit that lay beyond his very ordinary life.

He had an idea. It was quite unusual, very unconventional and, to tell the truth, morally questionable, though legal. He sprang the idea on his father. “Give me my share of the inheritance now,” he demanded. “In cash.” Likely that meant, as younger son, his

inheritance was one-third of the estate. He was treating his father as if he were dead when the moral and cultural obligation of sons was to use their money to support their parents in their old age.

The father reluctantly agreed. Perhaps the boy would learn the basic lessons of life out there on his own.

The younger son set off for a distant country. He couldn't wait to get his old life behind him. With a small fortune burning a hole in his pocket and the whole exciting world in front of him, he hurried away from home.

It was a Jewish parent's nightmare: an unprepared child far off in the dangerous and corrupt Gentile world. Some families held a funeral service for such a child. It's any parent's nightmare, especially when the child is not prepared for the destructive realities of the real world. The younger son was oblivious, thinking like the prodigals of every generation that he could engage in bad behavior with no consequences. There is no such moral universe.

In that far country, the boy began to live in grand style. He lived in a fancy apartment, wore fancy clothes and hung out with fancy friends. He had money, he had opportunity and he lived the good life. He spent his inheritance – his father's hard earned money, mind you – on wine, women and song. There was an abundance of it all.

But something began to happen to the prodigal – and to all prodigals. He was not the free man he longed to become. He was a slave to his new lifestyle and, more importantly, he was becoming the slave of his own desires. As Helmut Thielicke puts it so well, "he begins to hear the rattle of the invisible chains in which he walks and it is beginning to make him groan."

Before he knew it his money ran out and that far country slid into a terrible economic depression. He lost everything. Without money he had no fancy friends or life – and he experienced another lack of freedom: poverty. He finished a wild, catastrophic slide into a hell of his own making. He was now a penniless foreigner whose only employment was taking care of pigs. The Jewish boy raised kosher hit bottom, ended up feeding pigs, and was so hungry he was tempted to eat what he fed the pigs. Again, as Thielicke puts it, "a bitter cry goes up from the pigsty." And "nobody helped him." Nobody cared.

Disgusted with himself and the terrible mess he'd made of his life, as Jesus puts it, "He came to himself." He woke up and began to think straight for the first time in a long time. "Maybe my father still cares. Maybe if I go home I can be one of the servants and have food to eat and a roof over my head."

He decided to go home and throw himself on the mercy of his father. He decided what he'd say when he got home. "Father I sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired hands."

He owned up to his own stupidity and decided to turn his life around. He repented, got up and still stinking of pigs and his unwashed body, headed for his father's house.

Suddenly, the scene shifts again from the pigsty to the front porch of his father's house. There, it seems, the father has been waiting all along. He never lost hope and, day after day, sat on the porch, eyes searching the horizon, waiting for his lost son to come home.

Then one day, he saw the familiar figure in the distance. "It's him," he shouted. He leaped up from his seat and called a servant. Breaking all conventional behavior for a Middle Eastern patriarch, the father gathered up his robe and raced down the road to greet his lost son. He wrapped his stinking boy in a warm embrace and began to kiss him.

The boy began his confession. "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you..." His father interrupted and order his servant to bring a robe for his son – a king's gift and

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a sign of status. “And bring the signet ring too,” he ordered. The ring was a sign of authority in the family. “And don’t forget some shoes,” the father added. Only slaves went around unshod and this boy was no slave – not ever.

The son was not only welcome home he was reinstated as a son with full honors and status. The father asked no questions, made no accusations and laid down no conditions for reinstatement. All that was necessary had been accomplished. The father had always been waiting with open arms. All that was needed was for the boy to decide to come home. That’s all that mattered.

“By the way,” the father said to his servant, “kill the fatted calf, hire an orchestra and invite all our friends and neighbors. We are having a party to end all parties. My son who was dead is alive, he was lost and now is found.”

The scene shifts once more – now to the outside of the father’s house with the party in full swing inside. The elder brother approached the house after a long day of labor in the fields. Apparently, he’d been running the business during the years his prodigal brother was lost.

He heard the music, the glasses clinking and the laughter. He grabbed a servant and asked what was going on. The servant joyfully told him that his lost brother was home and that his father was throwing a welcome home party.

Now the elder brother was the responsible and virtuous son. He was a dutiful and good son who did what was right, kept his head down and obeyed village conventions. The resentment built up over the years burst out of the elder son. This was just not fair. It was unjust and not right. That prodigal had blown his fortune while he’d stayed home and worked the farm. He refused to go in his father’s house.

The father heard, went outside and begged his son to come inside. “Your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found. Come in and celebrate our good fortune.”

The elder brother rudely responded, “You listen to me. All these years I’ve worked my tail off for you. I never disobeyed one of your directives. You never gave me so much as a goat dinner for all my labors. I deserve better than this. Meanwhile, this son of yours who devoured your property with prostitutes comes home and it’s veal and wine and dancing for everyone. It is not right, not fair and not just. I don’t deserve this disrespect.”

The father responded gently, “Son, you are always with me. All I have is yours. You don’t understand. My son who was dead is alive, he was lost and is found. I have to celebrate – and you should too.”

Not unlike the Prodigal, the elder son needed to repent: come to himself and change his mind about life in his father’s house. It was the only way he could enter the house and enjoy the goodness of his father.

And there the story ends, with the father outside begging his self-righteous, outraged son to come into his house. And that son has a decision to make. Can he come to himself, change his mind and go in? Everyone is welcome in his father’s house. But you have to decide whether or not to go in.

The proper title for the parable is not The Prodigal Son. It is a story about The Waiting Father. Jesus offers a new and powerful vision of the biblical God, and that God is not what we humans expect.

The God revealed by Jesus Christ is not like us. God doesn’t tally up offenses and good deeds and reward us accordingly. God’s love and favor are not earned – and certainly not deserved. God loves us with incomprehensible love and mercy because God can’t help it. It’s what it means to be God.

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None of us get what we deserve – and that is good news indeed.

This is an appropriate story for Lent. During Lent we ask what it means to be me and what it means to be a person of faith in the God revealed in Jesus. The ultimate Lenten question is whether we've ever met that merciful God.

Not just any God will do. The Christian God loves us with an incomprehensible love that makes no sense on a human scale of justice. That God invites us to come home where we belong. But we have to decide to go home where we belong. In some ways it's a decision that never ends. Every day God calls us, "Come home child." We decide.

Amen.

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