

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 31, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“The Prodigal Father”

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We're in the middle of Lent. The forty days are a time to look at ourselves and repent of our sin. By sin I mean how we allow the world to distract us from the good life God wants for us. Sin creeps in when we neglect our relationship with God, when we take God's love and forgiveness for granted. It aims to realign our loyalty and love away from God and towards other gods, such as nationalism, wealth, and sex. We are bombarded daily by all the gods competing for attention in the marketplace aimed at convincing us that I am all that matters, my wants, my desires, my needs. Sin turns love inward and tells me to fear my neighbor, the immigrant, the refugee, and the poor. Sin is dis-ordered love that alienates us from God and our neighbor.

Given the reality of sin and its power to separate us from God and think too much of ourselves, today's gospel lesson is a good word for us. It is a parable of grace. It's one of three parables in Luke 15. All make the same point: God loves and desires a relationship with God's children. God loves us because God made us. God made us because God is LOVE.

Luke 15:2 is important as introduction to the parables, but I think it's also a signal of God's good news for us. The religious authorities who mistakenly believe God only cares about sanctified, holy people grumble and complain out-loud: “This fellow [Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus made a point of hanging out with people looked down upon by religious leaders. The ordinary sinners are Jesus' friends. I think that's good news for us today because all of us sinners need Jesus as our friend.

The parable of the prodigal father is good news for all of us. It tells the story of how grace works to restore our relationship with God and sets us free to live the good life God desires for us.

I call this the “parable of the prodigal father” because the story is really about the father and his love for both sons. Jesus signals this by the way he begins the parable, “There was a man who had two sons.”

Grace is central to the way of salvation and the Christian life. It is especially important in our Wesleyan-Methodist tradition. The beginning of this parable is an illustration of what John Wesley called “preventing” or “prevenient” grace. Prevenient means “coming before.” Grace is prevenient before we are aware of God or what God is doing to awaken us to God's existence, acceptance, and love. Prevenient grace gives us the freedom to say “yes” and “no” to God.

We see this when the younger son tells his father to drop dead and demands his inheritance be given to him immediately. He didn't want to wait for his father to die to get what was coming to him. The father gave him what he demanded and let him go. Jesus tells us the younger son took his inheritance and all his belongings with him. He went to a distant country where he spent all his money on “dissolute living.” In other words, he blew it all on sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. He was determined to go out and make his own way in the world and live the way he wanted to live, free of his father's household rules and responsibilities of living in his father's house.

When all his money was gone his new friends abandoned him and there was a famine in the land. No one helped him, so he hired himself out to a farmer who sent him to feed his pigs. He was so hungry that he was tempted to eat the slop he was feeding the pigs. It's safe to assume he is a Jewish young man. Feeding pigs was bad enough but wanting to eat what the pigs ate is a sign that he's gotten as low as he can go. That's when Jesus says, “he came to himself.” He realized he was his father's son, and that he had sinned against his father and God.

Prevenient grace awakened him to his condition: He is his father's son and he is a sinner in need of forgiveness and a home. That's when he says to himself, "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So, he set off to return to his father.

Prevenient grace prepares us to accept God's acceptance. God loves us and gives us the freedom to say "yes" and "no" to God and God's love. Like a loving parent, God lets us live life our way, and live as though God doesn't exist. The good news for us is that God's love does not depend on whether we believe in God.

The younger son heads home knowing that he no longer deserves to be welcomed as a son. He hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand. Jesus tell us, "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." This tells us the father never stopped loving his son. His love went with his son to the foreign country. That parental love is what helped the son know he had a home and a father.

While the younger son is giving his speech of contrition the father is giving instructions to the servants: "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

The reunion of father and son is an illustration of justifying grace. This is the grace that restores our relationship with God. It's important to understand that in the culture of the ancient world elder adults, parents, never go, let alone run, to a child. Children always go to the parent. Jesus is telling us the father loved his son so much that he ran to embrace him. His love compelled him to humiliate himself. Just like God's love for the world compelled him to humiliate himself and submit to death on a cross. God loves each of us like the father in the parable loved his sons. God doesn't care what it costs to restore even one like you or me to life in God's household.

The father does the same for his older son who is angry because his younger brother was welcomed home with a party. He refused to join in the celebration. Once again, the father humiliated himself and went to his son to explain to him, "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."

Just like the father in the parable, God's love for us welcomes us home with celebration. Our place in God's household is God's gift because God loves and knows each of us beyond measure. This is what we call justifying grace, or justification. There's nothing we can do or say to earn God's acceptance and love. It is pure gift.

The good news for us today is that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. And God forgives and loves each of us like the prodigal father loved and forgave his sons. One way to put this good news is: "God loves you, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Amen.