

Readings - Lent 4
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15: 1-3; 11b-32

Grace Misunderstood

I imagine almost all of us have placed ourselves in this story already. We know who we are, we know how we interpret this homecoming parable. The story of the prodigal son or now more commonly called the prodigal father is likely the most well know parable in all of the bible. It carries a lot of weight because it is a beautiful story but more than that it is a story we can understand in one way or another.

Coming home is coming to God. And although I often use this metaphor of homecoming this parable gives us a pretty frank example of what homecoming can look like. Coming home for some is an occasion for celebration, homecoming for others is messy. I think we would all like to have every visit home to be a welcome like that of the younger brother but more often than not there is an older brother lurking around ruining the party. And the reality is sometimes we are that older brother.

This parable of Jesus once again has characters behaving oddly. God (the father in this story) is acting in a way that is completely contrary to conventional wisdom and expectations. I am sure to his friends the father in this story was a laughing stock.

First of all, what father would grant a request like this one? It was as if the son were wishing his father dead and yet the father gives him his request. "The father appears recklessly indulgent. Because the son's request would bring such shame to the household, granting it makes the father appear foolhardy, not generous."¹ And then when the son returns the father goes right back to his foolhardy ways. What dignified man would run out to see his son with such emotion? His son hasn't even offered an apology or an explanation, he is setting himself up to be burned again. And then to top it all off without a thought this hasty father welcomes his son back into the household with a robe, ring, sandals and a feast.

I can already hear what the majority would be saying as we watched on. He is going to be in trouble. This child needs to repent. I wouldn't be doing that if I were him.

Lets be honest. The older brother is right to be upset. But as Matt Skinner said in his commentary we have two economies at work here. The economy of the father and that of the elder brother. If we see ourselves as the elder brother we know what is right and just. The issues

¹ Skinner, Matt. Commentary on the gospel workingpreacher.org

of equity really matter. Accountability is essential. We can't afford to just be throwing our money and especially not our love out to anyone whenever they ask for it. Can we?

But the economy of the father is not an economy of counting. There is a place to count and a place for relationships. As Paul wrote the reconciliation God offers is ongoing. It is a constant activity. God longs to offer reconciliation at all times so that the anguish and hurt of this world may end so that a new creation will be formed.

Grace is not offered when folks become perfect and get it right. Grace is inexplicable. "The extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our sense of right and wrong."² It seems God's grace is overly eager to restore.

As a counsellor and someone who has worked a lot with addicts if someone were to walk into my office with this story I might want to know if the son repented. I might want to know if he is sincere and although I might suggest he be given a chance I would recommend this be done with awareness and caution. I would acknowledge that he was the one who came back and I would give him credit for that. And I would do my best to offer grace - but I am not the father in this story. Because unlike God I am human and I am still working on being a person of extravagant welcome.

One commentator argued that we never do hear the son repent. He says "The absence of repentance language is striking... The son's rehearsed speech smacks of insincerity and a plan designed to tug at his gullible father's heartstrings. Perhaps Jesus' point is that even scoundrels are joyfully welcomed in God's household. Just pointing oneself toward home is what unleashes God's welcome. Any motive will do.

However we judge the younger son's motives, still the story retains a deeply scandalous flavor in the father's exuberant response to his returned son. The father welcomes home a loser, as a loser, and restores him to his standing as a son. Coming home at rock bottom was all he had to do."³

While I was watching the Opening ceremonies of the Paralympics I thought Rick Hansen said it best "I learned I didn't need to be cured to be whole as a human being" That is exactly what The Holy is saying. Come as you are. You are made in my image. You are my creation. I long to make you whole just as you are.

"The extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our sense of right and wrong." That is why we understand the hurt, alienation and confusion of the elder brother. We might even find ourselves resentful. I am glad the elder son appears in this story because he helps me recognize

² Taylor, BB sermon nuggets textthisweek.com

³ Skinner.

myself. The elder son forces us to see how we have misunderstood grace. We have misunderstood our creator if we think we or others are only worthwhile if we are perfect.

“This son cannot see the situation in any way but according to his own conventions of justice and through the torments of the lack of appreciation he suffers. The father's response to the younger son utterly confounds the rules, doctrines, and convictions that confine the elder son.”⁴

The elder son helps us see the scandal of God’s grace. And then he too is welcomed by the father but it is up to him to decide if he can accept his own homecoming. You see the younger brother lives entirely by grace while the elder lives by obedience. We might ask which one is living freedom?

If the younger son is going to survive he badly needs some of his older brothers discipline and devotion; if the elder son is going to survive he badly needs some of his younger brothers brokenness and humility.

“Both sons, each in his own way, misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the elder cannot let go of sacred canons and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home, regardless. They call us to reassess our own standards and the basis of our relationship to God.”

There is another story of brothers that has been in front of us in the last weeks. Someone shared a story with me this week about a conversation they had with a visitor from out of country during the Olympics who was brought to tears by the coverage of Alex Bilodeau and his brother Frederick. The visitor said we still hide those things in our country - we wouldn’t be holding Frederick up like that. It made my friend proud to be a Canadian and it does for me as well. This is a story of two brothers who have discovered just as Rick Hansen did you “*don’t* need to be cured to be whole human beings.” How can we come to discover that for ourselves and for one another?

See as beautiful as these stories are it also highlights for me the people we still do not welcome.

We will always struggle with grace because it doesn’t have the same accounting we do. Today if you are the younger brother coming back home know you are welcomed. If you are the elder brother struggling with grace know you are welcome. And today let us as a community continue to discover welcome ways.

In board meeting this week we were asking again what are the needs around us. How can we be caring for our community? Our homework for this month is to discover new ways to welcome. I would offer that same homework to all of us.

⁴ Skinner

Last week I shared the challenge of the store owner to keep this energy, excitement, coming together happiness experience up. How can we be more like this father - are we willing to run out of these doors and welcome people to this place. Are we willing to accept people without even knowing where they stand? Are we willing to offer some misunderstood Grace?

I hope we are.

Amen.