

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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 wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them.

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

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

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

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

15:17 But when he came to his senses 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 as 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 assets 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.'"

Sermon:

Each noonday it's the same. A landowner makes his way to the top of a ridge that bisects his property. Atop this peak, he inspects the activity of his estate. Orchards and fields are filled with workers tending to their daily chores. But it's not the orchards and fields that capture the landowner's attention. It's the road that leads out beyond the horizon. The landowner is waiting.

He's not just a landowner. He's a Daddy. Some time ago, his youngest boy decided it was time to grow up, time to leave the farm for a newer,

bigger, better adventure. The father complied. He gave his son his inheritance. And off that boy went.

Each evening, the boy's parents struggle through sleepless nights. They wonder about their child's safety, wonder what's become of him, wonder what would have happened had they denied his request for an early inheritance. Restless nights give way to anxious days.

But a parent always lives with hope. Each day, just before noon, as he makes those last few steps up the ridge, he hopes beyond all hope, that he will one day see his son again. Today, as he crests the hill, this daddy sees a familiar figure in the horizon. It's his baby boy. Walking home. His pace quickens. A trot turns into a run. A gleeful daddy glides toward his child.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

Way off in the horizon, a hot sun beats down on a dusty road, a road that is hard, and cracked, and relentless on traveling sandals. A young man struggles to put one foot in front of the other. He is hungry. He is exhausted. But most of all, he is ashamed. He wanted to get out of this place. He thought he knew better. He thought he was ready for the world, ready for adulthood, ready for the adventure of a lifetime. He wasn't. It turns out the world was rougher than he thought. It chewed him up and spit him out. One minute, he was flashing coin from his inheritance, enjoying the fine linens and the fine wines. The next minute, his fortune was squandered, and he was working as a hired hand. And he was so hungry that even pig-slop looked appealing. How had he gotten to rock bottom?

Tail between his legs, he decides to come back home, beg his father for forgiveness, and be content to spend his days working as a servant on his father's estate. It won't all be rosy, but it beats the alternative of isolation, shame, and despair.

The whole way home, he's practiced the speech he will give his father. It'll need to be good. Great, even. As he turns the bend, he is pleased to see his daddy's estate. And then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a familiar figure, his father. And he's running. And he's smiling. And wow, he's fast! This is not the homecoming he expects.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

Down in the fields, an older brother wipes his brow. He's a few hours into another tiring day of plowing and sowing, bending and pushing, swinging and chopping.

He's the good son. Always has been. The landowner never had to ask him to do something twice, and he's never once ignored his responsibilities to go carousing in the big city. He is duty-bound and loyal to his daddy. Life has been difficult since his younger brother left. There's more work to do now. And the dinner table's not the same. His parents lament the void they feel in his brother's absence.

With each swing of his plowshare, the older brother is reminded of his extra workload. He's reminded that a third of his inheritance no longer exists. And there is anger and resentment, too. It's not fair when people ignore the rules, and yet still they are coddled. And there is grief. He doesn't want to admit it, but he misses his brother. How can someone just leave? No notice. No nothing. Just gone. Doesn't the family mean something to him?

As the older brother completes the last row of the day, he makes his way back toward the main house. There's a commotion. A big one. A servant tells him the news. "There is to be a banquet – your brother has returned!"

Grace. It came like a flash. A son was lost, but now is found! Ugh. Of Course he is.

When Jesus shares this parable, he is not only explaining the nature and character of God's grace, but he is also offering a commentary on this world's reception of God's grace.

God waits for us like a parent waiting for a child. God not only waits for us, but God also sprints toward us, even in our pride, even in our shame, even when we fail to live into our potential. And God celebrates our return with lavish love: a robe, a ring, a fatted calf, a banquet, music, the whole nine, all symbolic of our restoration as heirs of God's kinship – God wraps us in the loving embrace of a lasting, bigger-than-life kind of grace. Jesus tells us that God's grace is not only miraculously extravagant, but it's also infinite, and fluid, and patient.

Somehow, Jesus knows us all too well. Because in every age, we seek to make God's grace a commodity, a good to be hoarded and bartered.

The younger son receives grace upon grace from his father. He'd intended to sacrifice his privilege as the householder's son and become a servant to make amends for his misdeeds. Instead, his father immediately restores his status.

But I wonder, as he puts back on his fine robe, and enjoys the nice party in his honor, will he remember the desperation he felt as a hired hand?

Does he realize the extra work he's created for his father's servants? Now that he's back to enjoying the benefits of privilege, will he still empathize with those who are hungry, those who are ashamed, those who have been cast out, those who are strangers, those who feel alienated? Will he offer others the grace that's been afforded to him? Or will he simply think, "Better them than me!"

The older son receives grace as well. He chastises his father for being generous and forgiving. He suggests that such mercy is an assault on his loyalty. It's not fair. Besides, there's not enough grace to go around. Grace given to his brother must mean less grace for him. And what has his younger brother done to deserve his father's grace? Nothing!

But the father gently reminds him, "I have always loved you. All that is mine is yours. But your brother has returned, and in his return, we are made whole. So come. Join us in celebration!"

And I wonder, will the older brother ever be able to accept a grace and love that extend beyond his own silo? Or is his spite more satisfying than mercy? Does he believe in a grace big enough for everyone? Will he stew outside the banquet, or will he come back to the party?

I also wonder about sisters. One brother receives an unexpected grace. The other hesitates to credential a grace not of his liking. And yet their sisters inherit a world of marginalization. Their gender won't afford them the luxury of an inheritance and self-autonomy, let alone a mention in the story. Do the brothers understand grace with any sense of empathy?

If we pay attention to this parable, really pay attention to this parable, we realize something: just like the two brothers, we seek to make God's

grace a commodity. We demand that God's grace be fair and measurable. As people of faith, we also often act a lot like those Pharisees and Scribes. We've got the exclusive on the God stuff. We're doing what's right, and therefore we've earned what others are not yet entitled to.

But Jesus offers us a not-so-gentle reminder. God's grace is not fair. And God's grace is not measurable. God's grace is sufficient. And God's gonna do with God's grace as God's gonna do.

And a grace that is sufficient is the kind of grace that doesn't compute in Caesar's kingdom.

Want proof? Just turn on the news. Listen to the rhetoric. Grace is for insiders, but never for outsiders.

Walls and fences to keep out immigrants; flights to send them away; the same old stigmas recycled in new packaging to incite fear. The privileged somehow persecuted. Penal systems designed to dole out double doses of retribution. Over-hyped masculinity, colonialism, bullying celebrated. Racism tolerated. Civility abandoned. If you listen to the rhetoric of Caesar's world, not just in this age, but in every age, it will tell you that there's only so much goodness and mercy to go around, so you better stake your claim while you can, snatch it up with a tight grip.

But Jesus reminds us:

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore, we have no need of walls to keep our neighbors out, nor to confine our love securely.

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore, we have no need of documents to prove our righteousness, nor a of a righteousness to lord over others.

God's grace is sufficient. Therefore, God's banquet is big enough for all, with abundance, and leftovers, even.

Friends, in this Lenten season, we wait for God's redemption. We wait for God's healing and restoration. And Christ tells us, God waits for us, even longs for us, and will run toward us when we come.

The question for us to ponder this season is not when, or even if, we'll be recipients of God's grace. We have that grace. It's not in doubt. Ever.

The question is this: Are we willing to live in a world where we accept that God's grace is available and sufficient to and for all people? Period. No exclusions. No disclaimers. No expirations. No matter what.

It's grace. In a flash. A son was lost, but now is found!

In God's kin-dom, that's cause for celebration. What is it in the kingdom of our own hearts?

Amen.