

“Joyful Grace”

Luke 15:1-32

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Philip Yancey writes, “A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents a bit old tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. “I hate you!” she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she’s ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she’s ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun. The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him “Boss”—teaches her a few things that men like. Since she’s underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline, “Have you seen this child?” But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. “These days, we can’t mess around,” he growls, and before she knows it she’s out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don’t pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in, she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. “Sleeping” is the wrong word—-a teenage girl at night in down town Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty, and she’s hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she’s piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She’s sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, “Dad, Mom, it’s me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way, and it’ll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, well, I guess I’ll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada.”

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn’t she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. “Dad, I’m sorry. I know I was wrong. It’s not your fault; it’s all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?” She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn’t apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She’s forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. Oh, God.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone “Fifteen minutes, folks. That’s all we have here.” Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice. If they’re there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty, brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They’re all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads “Welcome home!”

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, “Dad, I’m sorry. I know . . .”

He interrupts her. “Hush, child. We’ve got no time for that. No time for apologies. You’ll be late for the party. A banquet’s waiting for you at home.”

Phillip Yancey says, “We are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but in Jesus' stories of extravagant grace there is no catch, no loopholes, no disqualifications from God's love. Each has at its core an ending too good to be true—or, so good that it must be true.” Yancey continues. “How different are these stories from my own childhood notions about God: a God who forgives, yes, but reluctantly, after making the penitent squirm. I imagined God as a stern taskmaster, a distant, thundering figure who prefers fear and respect to love. Jesus tells instead of a father publicly humiliating himself by rushing out to embrace a son who has squandered half the family fortune. There is no solemn lecture, “I hope you've learned your lesson!” Instead, Jesus emphasizes the father's exhilaration—“this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found”—and then adds, “they began to make merry.”

God’s grace forgives, heals, makes whole, renews, invigorates and permeates us with joyful, abundant life. God delights in each of us. There are no limits to God’s grace. However, religion and most of us try to earn grace and limit grace. Most believe in at least a snippet of legalism that you must do something, at least believe in God, for God’s grace to embrace us. Most of us, at times, are like the religious leaders speculating that some people are beyond the grace of God. Jesus was forgiving, welcoming, healing people from other religions, unrepenting people who kept on sinning, people who never went to church and who had no intentions to ever attend in the future. Jesus’ grace was freely given to even those who never even said thank you.

Luke 15:1-7 NLT “Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the teachers of religious law complain that Jesus was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!”

God promises to find every lost person, forgive them, and bring them back into loving community. Each of us, at times, is the lost sheep in need of God’s grace to heal us and bring us back into joyful, loving

community. We become lost in a variety of ways; sometimes failing to love, other times becoming weary, depressed, pessimistic, sometimes hurting from crisis, other times ailing from health issues, sometimes wandering in dark uncertainty, other times unable to feel joyful and grateful for the abundant life God provides, sometimes unable to fully receive God's grace to believe that we are forgiven, to be certain that we are God's cherished beloved child. Anytime you do not sense God's joyful delight in you, anytime you do not feel loved by God and others you are the lost sheep. Whenever you are lost remember; God always knows your situation. God will never leave you. God will always renew you even if all your thoughts and actions are sinful. We are lost and found over and over again throughout our life.

Each of us, at times, is one of the 99. In these instances God calls us to join God in finding, forgiving, empowering and welcoming home the lost. We discover from our lost sheep moments that grace is free of charge to us. We do not deserve grace. As a church we are to be a culture of grace, always welcoming and forgiving people. Rejoicing with every person. We are incomplete whenever one person is separated from community. God will not stop until every person is welcomed home to God's love so all can rejoice together. Each of us is called to partner with God in helping others get home and then celebrating their return.

Each of us, at times is the shepherd. We love someone yet they run away. We try to express our love but it is misunderstood. We try to share our love but it is rejected. God's grace will heal your relationship. Every relationship will be made vibrant with joyful, mutual love.

Jesus said. **Luke 15:8-10** "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

Each person is precious to God. The Kingdom of God is incomplete until all the lost are found. God is unfailing in tenacious, extravagant grace. Whenever we are grumpy that God's grace has forgiven, healed and welcomed another home we become lost until we are able to fully and freely join the celebration.

Yancey said. "I have meditated enough on Jesus' stories of grace to let their meaning filter through. Still, each time I confront their astonishing message I realize how thickly the veil of ungrace obscures my view of God. A housewife jumping up and down in glee over the discovery of a lost coin is not what naturally comes to mind when I think of God. Yet that is the image Jesus insisted upon."

Luke 15:11-32 NLT "To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."' "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.' "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All

these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!' "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

Counselor David Seamand, summed up his career this way: "Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people...We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions."

You will be forgiven for feeling like the older brother. In time you will be healed of your ungrace and be able to join the party. On earth you have a choice to be bitter over the forgiveness of your enemies or let God's grace flow through you so you to are able to whole hearted forgive and join the celebration.

We are the ones that try to limit God's grace for others. God's grace is infinite. We are the ones that think we are beyond God's grace, feel we do not deserve God's grace and strive to earn God's grace. God's grace will forgive and make each of us complete. God is always eager to hug us. We are the ones that sometimes turn away; never God. Whenever you turn away, God is a love sick parent. Every time you allow God to pick you up, God rejoices. Amen