

“Celebrate Grace”

Luke 15:1-3 & 11b-32 & 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Prayer for Understanding God of open doors, we often long to come home to you, to love, and to ourselves, but we aren't always sure how to get there. We know that we need you, but the road back to you is heavy with distractions. So, if we can dare to be so forward, we pray—reach into the cacophony of our hearts and minds and make yourself known. Quiet everything but your Word for us today. Leave us awestruck. Drown out the distractions. Come as thunder or come as a still, small voice; we don't care which, we just pray that you will come. Turn on the light. Speak through these words. Find the parts of us that are lost. With hope we pray, amen.

Our gospel lesson is the story of the forgiven sons. At times each of us plays all three roles. Listen for the expansive grace for each person, the extravagant grace for you in every situation.

The gospel of Luke. **Luke 15:1-3 & 11b-32 NLT** “Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that Jesus was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! So 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!’”

This is a story of extravagant grace for everyone. The young son teaches us to accept grace, to celebrate, to enjoy love, to join the party. Like the young son, all of us have wasted God’s blessings. The young son teaches us to be aware of the ways he hurt others and ourselves, to be aware of talents we have not nurtured, to be aware of consumption, to be aware of the ways we fail to give and receive love. The young son teaches us to not beat ourselves up over our mistakes, to not wallow in guilt, to not stay away, but rather to use our awareness as motivation to return home and accept grace.

The older son teaches us to not become so driven in our pursuit of righteousness that we lack grace for others. The party was for the older son as well. The party was for everyone. All were graciously invited to the

celebration. God is begging you to let go of whatever it is that is holding you back from accepting grace, joining the party, loving everyone, rejoicing with everyone.

The father teaches us to be gracious to everyone. Gracious to those who run. Gracious to those who are wasteful. Gracious to those who are reckless and hurtful. Gracious to those who struggle to accept the free gift of love. Gracious to those who are jealous and judgmental. Gracious to those who are hesitant to enjoy God's blessings. Gracious to everyone.

“Grace”

a poem by Sarah Speed

First came the taking, the leaving, the wandering.
Then came the using, the wasting, the losing.
Next came the knowing, the grieving, the returning.
And then the father ran to his son and put his arms around him.
It breaks the rhythm.
Grace always does.

The word “prodigal” is commonly used to describe the son who squanders his inheritance. Yet, this parable invites us to consider how God's grace is also prodigal—extravagant, lavish, illogical. This parable disrupts and expands our definitions of grace. Once again, grace is not earned. After wasting his resources, the younger son becomes destitute and returns home to his father, saying, “I am no longer worthy.” In response, his father welcomes him with a celebration. The older son, in contrast, has done everything “right”—he's tried to perform, work hard, check all the boxes—but he forgets how to celebrate. How might you receive and extend prodigal grace?

There are two types of invitations in the parable of extravagant grace. The first is to receive grace for yourself. The second is to share grace with others. Is there a part of this parable that sparks a feeling for you? Reflect on that aspect of the parable to discover God's invitation. Is there a part that seems illogical? Is there a part that challenges, surprises, or comforts you? Reflect on those aspects of the parable to discover God's invitation.

The parable of extravagant grace for everyone invites you to receive grace. Do you have regrets, guilt, mistakes, which need to be washed away by God's redeeming grace? Do you have thoughts that you need to do or be more that need to be washed away by grace? Are you sometimes hesitant to receive a gift or help? Let God's grace wash away your hesitance. Baptism is our visible sign that everyone is purified and welcomed into God's family.

The parable of extravagant grace for everyone invites you to expand your grace. Do you struggle to be gracious to a certain type of person? Are you gracious to “younger son” type people who consume large sums of resources that you perceive as wasteful? Are you gracious to “older son” type people who struggle to welcome others and celebrate with those who they think should live differently? Are you gracious to “father” type people who give extravagantly to everyone and lack communication? Booker T. Washington said, “Let no one pull you so low as to hate them.” The Lord's Supper is our visible sign that we are to sit down with everyone, share with everyone, and enjoy everyone's company.

In the parable, each person regardless of what they have done, and not done, all receive grace. No one earns grace. Grace unites them all together. Grace draws them all into the celebration. God's grace is infinite and eternal. Whatever our life looks like God's grace makes each of us wonderful and unites all of us in harmony. Open yourself to receive grace. Be gracious to everyone.

Philip Yancey, in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, tells the story of the younger son in 1990s context. This is an adaptation of Philip's writing.

“A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. She screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument. She takes all her parents' cash and a few valuable items she can pawn. She runs away.

Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid details the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. She gets 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. Working odd jobs. Delivering packages for her drug dealer. The good life

continues for a year. 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 a flier with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup, tattoos, 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 her friends abandon her. And before she knows it, she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She can't get a job. She is suffering withdraw. She struggles to keep warm as she sleeps on a metal grate. "Sleeping" is the wrong word – a teenage girl at night in downtown 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.

She begs enough change for a pay phone and a bus ticket. The call goes to voicemail. 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. 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.

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 and smooths her hair. 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, aunts, uncles, cousins, even her grandmother. And taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a banner that reads, "Welcome Home!" Out of the crowd of cheers and 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..." He interrupts her. "Hush child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You will be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

After this story, Yancey adds the following comment: "We are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but Jesus' stories of extravagant grace include no catch, no loophole disqualifying us from God's love."

God rejoices however anyone comes home to God's love. It matters not what anyone has done or not done. God graciously welcomes everyone home.

"What Doesn't Play by the Rules"

a poem by Sarah Speed

I come into the room calculating what I've done,
as if hurt could be measured,
as if there was a score system,
as if we could say what I owe in return.
I come into the room
ready to apologize,
ready to make amends,
ready to tell you all the things I'll do to make it better,
but you put your arms around me.
Grace is the ocean that softens the edges.
Grace is rain in the desert—
you're not sure whether to laugh, cry, or dance.
Grace is a miracle, all by itself.
In a scorekeeping world, grace doesn't play by the rules.
I come into the room calculating what I've done.
You say there's grace here.
It feels like a miracle.
I don't know whether to laugh, cry, or dance.

Kristen Powers wrote: "Practicing grace is really hard. We incline ourselves toward ungrace, fuming about people we think are undeserving. Often, ungrace is the lens through which we view people who don't share our religious, political, or moral values. Our lack of grace makes the world a brutal place.

Grace is not rolling over and being a doormat; Grace is not a tool to excuse harmful behavior or defend the status quo. Grace doesn't demand you check your passionate beliefs or personality at the door. You still get to have big emotions and strong opinions. You don't have to ditch your dry sarcasm or devastating wit. Grace creates space for all of us.

Grace is what makes human coexistence possible. Every thriving relationship is saturated with grace. Grace is what lets us stumble, fall, get back up and try again. Grace is what welcomes you back after you have failed someone or failed yourself. Grace is the 'x' factor, knitting families, friendships, and countries back together after betrayal, hurt and even violence. Grace is refusing to reduce people to the sum of their worst actions. Grace is borrowing the eyes of God. Grace enables us to see the divinity in every person, no matter what they have done, what they believe or for whom they voted. Grace is giving other people space to not be you. Grace shushes the inner critic that tells us we are not good enough. Grace shrugs at your unachieved goals and teaches you to be kind to yourself, just because. Grace smooths the edges of rough regret about the things we did and the things we failed to do. Grace tills the ground so that peace, wholeness, and completeness can take root in our burdened bodies, relationships and the world."

The Apostle Paul writes: **2 Corinthians 5:16-21 NLT** "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know Jesus now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to God through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to God. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God, no longer counting people's sins against them. And God gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making an appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."

Celebrate grace. Amen