

“RECONCILIATION ...CLOSER TO HOME”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32

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Intro to Luke 15:11-32: It's important to keep in mind the context of this familiar story: The upright religious leaders are grumbling, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (verse 1). Jesus responds with three stories, of which this is the third and longest.

The parable we call “The Prodigal Son” – or you could just as easily call it “The Waiting Father” or “The Angry Brother” – is one of Jesus’ most powerful stories. It speaks poignantly about broken relationships, beautifully about forgiveness, and profoundly about how difficult reconciliation can be.

We can find ourselves in this story.

We can find ourselves in the younger son’s selfish and impulsive rebellion, and its bitter consequences. No suffering is quite like the pain you know you’ve brought on yourself. There’s the difficult journey to that place of admitting the truth. There’s the humbling experience of facing those he’s wronged, asking forgiveness, and acknowledging that he needs help. There’s his inability to imagine that he won’t have to somehow atone, and go on atoning, for his actions. We know about all this. It’s familiar.

We can find ourselves in the father’s desire for reunion and reconciliation, in the deep well of love for both his very different sons, and in the helpless anguish and the sleepless nights he must have endured. In his readiness to forgive we glimpse a grace we long for and (sometimes at least) would like to aspire to. But we also see the painful reality that he cannot force either of his sons to reconcile with him or with each other. We know this, too.

We can find ourselves in the older brother’s dutiful, if joyless, good behavior, his outraged sense of justice, his resentment. In his convictions about what he deserves and what his brother deserves, his certainty that his brother’s gain is his loss, his inability to be glad that his sibling’s life has turned around. Somehow we get the impression that this son is not really quite at home with his father, though he has never gone anywhere. Perhaps he is not really quite at home with himself, either. We know all this, as well.

This story hits close to home – it resonates with the state of our hearts, our families, our relationships, our society. It’s a story of deep hurt and heartfelt desire for healing in relationships. It’s also a study in how profoundly difficult that is. It raises some hard questions for us, no matter what part of the story we focus on, no matter our perspective at any given moment.

I couldn’t help, in this particular week, but hear this parable in the context of the horrific shooting that has dominated our news and our minds – and that divides us as much as it unites us in sorrow and outrage. That, together with the parable, shaped a whole lot of questions that are following me around.

For example, why do we have such a hard time admitting that we have a problem? Why is it so hard to ask for help, to say “I’m sorry,” or to change our minds? Why is it so hard to see the people who so desperately need help? Why can’t we figure out a way to read the danger signs? How is it that a person can carry around the seeds of hate and violence, and no one knows? Why are we so disconnected from each other?

And why are we so angry? I’m not talking about healthy, righteous anger at injustice or dishonesty or suffering. I’m talking about the mindless, simmering, just-below-the-surface anger that’s all around us and often completely out of proportion to the circumstances that bring it forth.

Why is there so much resentment in our society and in our lives? More puzzlingly, why so much resentment of people who have *less* – less money, less power, less opportunity? Why do we operate so much out of an either-or mentality? You know the kind of thing I mean: we talk about the “real” problem as if our world doesn’t face many crises, or the people we should “really” be concerned about, as if there weren’t many people suffering or as if compassion needs to be rationed. Why do we put so much emphasis on who is “deserving” when God doesn’t? Why do we think “winning” is better than cooperating? What are we afraid of?

In short, why is grace so hard for us?

I’m talking about some of the big-picture cultural mood swirling around us ... but it’s no less true in our personal relationships and in our hearts. So much gets in the way of grace. We have a hard time asking for it, accepting it, living it, extending it to others. Grace is hard, no matter where find ourselves.

It’s always been that way, I guess. At least, Jesus’ parable seems to suggest that it has. But Jesus’ parable also pushes us to see that grace is the only thing that makes reconciliation possible. Jesus wants us to come to grips with grace.

Grace is woven through practically every line of the story.

Grace finds the younger brother when he has hit the bottom: We read that “he came to himself.” Isn’t that a wonderful phrase? He’s not only been away from home but away from his true self. But what a gift to be recalled to who you are meant to be! He finds the grace to acknowledge the truth, to swallow his pride and go home, to admit his wrongs without excuses, to seek forgiveness, to ask for help. Grace to enter to the loving and welcoming embrace he knows he doesn’t deserve (and which makes his actions look all the more reprehensible). Grace to accept that he is not going to be allowed to earn his way back into favor. None of this is easy. Only grace enables us to accept grace.

The father embodies for us the grace of God – the unconditional love of parent for child; forgiveness given freely and completely, without reservations or conditions or a probationary period or demands for repayment, but rather a welcome of joy and gratitude. That scene of loving reunion can bring tears to our eyes, not just because we can feel everything that father and his son must have felt, but because we know it’s also about how much God loves us. It’s amazing, humbling, and heartbreaking to be loved so far beyond what we deserve.

But even in that beautiful moment we see that living fully in grace is hard and costly. The father in the story has paid a price in terms of money, pride, personal pain, and reputation. What's more, it's clear that no amount of readiness to forgive will bring healing to a relationship as long as the other party wants no part of grace. We who are called to embody the grace of God in our own lives find that grace sometimes has to be held and carried a long, long time before reconciliation comes, and we have to accept that it's not up to us.

The older brother, like his sibling, is embraced in his father's love, although I think the father has to be aware that this "good" son has never shared his hopes for a family reconciliation. But the grace is for this lost older son, too. When he doesn't want to join the celebration, the father goes out to him ...much as he did to welcome the prodigal home. The invitation to the party hangs out there as the story breaks off. We don't know the ending. Does he go in? Or not? In any case, the door to home is open to him, too. But buying into grace is hard. You wouldn't think that something defined as "the free gift of God" would be so hard for us, but sometimes it is.

The story leaves us with a lot to wonder about. Not just whether the older brother finally joins the party. But: what will the two brothers say to each other? Will they acknowledge the ways they have hurt and misunderstood each other? Will they be able to listen? Will they be a family again? Will they be able to accept their father's love as enough for both of them rather than a prize to compete for? Will they learn enough of their father's generous, compassionate grace to live it themselves and to pass it to the next generation?

In this story, we see what grace can do. We see how its work begins. And we see how deep and complicated that work is. The amazing, many-faceted power of grace moves this whole story – it's in the repentance, the necessary truth-telling, the return, the waiting, the welcome, the forgiveness, the enduring love, the invitation, even perhaps in the articulation of hurt and longing, and in the reconciliation that's just begun.

It prompts us to ask ourselves where God's grace might be trying to work in our lives: Recalling us to who we're meant to be? Prompting us to examine our hearts? Giving us courage to see hard truths? Urging us to seek reconciliation or let go of resentment or ask forgiveness or get help? Asking us to take a more generous and compassionate view? Pushing us to take the first steps toward mending a relationship? Empowering us to keep on hoping and loving and reaching out? Telling us to stop keeping score? Inviting us to let down our guard and let joy in? Gently reminding us that we have always been loved and that we have a home?

Always bringing us back – again – to the limitless love and mercy of God.