

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 27, 2022

Rev. Pauline Farrington

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN

---

Our Lenten theme, Grace Unbounded, is one of those gospel messages that's just hard for us to wrap our minds around. The idea that God's grace and forgiveness really are without cost or strings messes with our sense of fairness. It doesn't fit into our human version of reality, especially when we consider that grace extends even to people or circumstances that seem, in our eyes, beyond the scope of any forgiveness and love, outside the bounds of grace — even God's grace.

Think of today's family of three, a father and two sons, being a microcosm of the whole human family. Jesus is telling a story that describes God's unbounded grace to the whole of humankind. There's a description of who is included in this in the first three verses.

Tax collectors and sinners are there along with Pharisees and scribes. Tax collectors and sinners, whose crimes, sins, failures, diseases, and over-all bad-ness, we believe, make them too defiled to be in the company of good, obedient, upstanding people — much less God.

Today's younger son would fall into this category.

Pharisees and scribes, on the other hand, are the "good" people who are obedient keepers of all the rules — a microcosm of all the different religious folks who claim exclusive access to God's grace. Today's older son would enjoy this status, or so he thought until his father broke all the rules.

Depending on the place from which you hear it, today's story might fill you with gratitude and joy, or it might make you sort-of mad! When Pastor Eric or I talk about grace that has no boundaries, we get different responses according to a person's point of view. When you think about it, there's just nothing about this story that seems fair according to our human sensibilities — it messes with our version of reality which tells us everything must be earned — we get only what we deserve.

One of our teachers in The Living School, James Finley, wrote this, “[This] parable reveals God’s version of reality. It reveals the way God always is toward us, regardless of how foolish and hurtful we may have been.”<sup>1</sup>

The father in our story never stopped loving, and looking for his son, even though the son had basically said to his father, “You’re as good as dead to me” when he demanded his inheritance early. As soon as the son was within sight, this father RAN to embrace him; he didn’t even listen to the son’s well-rehearsed speech but welcomed him home regardless of anything that had gone before.

Now, here’s one thing that often catches us up when we consider unbounded grace — contrition, remorse. This question arises, “Don’t we have to be sorry and ask to be forgiven?” We observe that the younger son came back, and that he might sincerely have been contrite. The case can also be made, however, that he was simply starving. So, calculating where he might get a meal, he contrived and rehearsed just the right words to ingratiate himself with his father. Nothing in the story says he was remorseful. But let’s say, for the sake of argument, he was sincerely contrite. The church has often tended to (and still does) teach God’s grace as conditional on our contrition, our remorse, our asking for forgiveness.

But that’s another human version of reality that misunderstands of the very nature of grace. Forgiveness based on contrition is a transaction. God’s grace is not a transaction. In fact, God’s grace precedes even our awareness of our offense, much less our contrition for it.

In today’s story this father has never stopped looking out the window, down the road, for the first faint sight of his son. The hugs and kisses are already ready and waiting. The robe and ring are close at hand. This son has never been disowned but has always been regarded as beloved child even when he was still in the pig sty.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Finley, Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God (HarperSanFrancisco: 2004), 279–280, 284.

It's simply that the father in our story loves of his sons — loves both of them — regardless of the good and the bad in each of them — and with that love comes belonging, forgiveness, and a persistent pursuit of each child's heart.

Which brings us to the response of the older son. In the face of his father's unbounded grace to his younger brother, the older son became angry and resentful. He basically tried to divorce himself from the family by refusing to acknowledge his brother — referring to him, instead, as “this son of yours”.

Nonetheless, when he was pouting on the porch, refusing to join the party, his father went out to him to plead with him to come in.

The father had compassion for both sons.

It's not as if the father suddenly preferred the younger and left the older out in the cold. The two brothers' roles don't get reversed.

In God's version of reality, love and grace are the way God always is toward us — all of us — no matter what has gone before, no matter what is true, even now, about us. Both sons are equally included.

Aahh, the equality factor comes to mind... and the question of the inheritance comes up. The money. Will the younger son (having spent all of his share) now encroach upon the share that should belong only to the older son?

Hhmm... that argument sounds similar to what the younger brother did when he demanded his share before the inheritance was yet an inheritance. The father was still alive. The money still belonged to the father, to do with as he chooses.

But there's an even more important problem with the fair-share-of-the-money argument. It just doesn't fly in the case of God's grace. That's where this parable shows the limitations of any human attempt to describe something too big for our language or even imagination to contain.

Any inheritance, even all the money, or property, or possessions in the whole wide world, has a finite nature. God's grace isn't finite. God's grace is infinite; it's unbounded. It doesn't run out. Anyway, grace isn't a question of quantity or fair share. Each one of us has exactly the grace we need. The grace given to me doesn't diminish the grace given to you.

In the end, there's no amount of sorting out the questions that come up when we consider something like grace without bounds. In our concept of reality there's no understanding it or finding logic in it or even easing our sense of unfairness about it. All we can do is acknowledge that grace is given, no matter what, and allow it to transform us so that we can live in the freedom and joy of it.

With grace that is relentless, our God watches the window of every human heart, waiting to see the first inkling of our ability to awaken to God's love. And God runs down the road to cover us with hugs and kisses that are already ours, to assure us of our belonging — of the beloved-child status that's been ours all along — even while we still stink from the pig sty.

That is simply good news for everybody!

When the world can finally see that, and we can see one another (no matter what) as beloved by God and full recipients of God's grace, maybe then we can begin to treat each other with that same kind of grace.

And what a transformation that would be — for the whole wide world, the whole human family.

God's family.