

“A Matter of Grace”

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Children usually start asking tough theological questions long before their parents are prepared to supply satisfying answers. Children ask questions like: Who is God, daddy? What’s God like, mommy? In a way, the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel is written to address these questions. Luke Fifteen is like a parent’s handbook for handling tough theological inquiries.

In this parable we see who God is. God is a loving parent whose love seems to have no end to it. If I could have just one painting hanging on my office wall, it would be a painting of the parent in the Prodigal Son story, standing outside on the front porch with arms wide open, anticipating the return of the wayward child. This is an image of God that speaks mightily to me.

When Jesus prayed to God, he began his prayer saying, “Abba,” which really means ‘daddy.’ It’s an affectionate term revealing the kind of intimate love shared by a parent and a child. In the Prodigal Son parable, it is this image of God, the parent whose love knows no expiration date, that leaps off the page and captures my imagination. The God Jesus knows; the God I know is that proverbial parent who never gives up on a child, no matter what!

You may not have discovered this yet, but our Town Transfer Station is a place where wonderful theological dialogue unfolds. A number of years ago, I hauled some recyclables there, and, as usual, ran into a neighbor with whom I struck up a conversation.

We shared our anxieties about our children and how so many things were out of our control. Finally, this neighbor of mine said, and I quote, “We just can’t ever give up on our children.” On that day, this was the sermon I needed to hear. For me, this is who God is: the parent who never gives up on any of the children no matter how far we stray from home.

Now, if the church trustees were to allow me a second painting on my office wall, it would be a painting of that same parent in the parable, but this time the painting would depict the parent pleading with the older brother to come on in to the party, to join in the rejoicing.

There’d be a pleading look on the parent’s face. The parent’s face would proclaim: **“You, too, are loved without condition. I understand how you’re feeling about my welcoming this rascal son of mine home. But just for this one time, rejoice with me, for this brother of yours was lost, and now is found.”**

This second painting would feature a look on the parent’s face that reveals how grace, that unmerited gift of love, is poured out for everyone; the ones who make foolish decisions and the ones who make wise decisions. It’s the face of a pleading parent. This too, is an image of God that speaks mightily to me.

My brother, Billy, is also an ordained minister. His ordination is in the Disciples of Christ denomination. The two denominations are kissing cousins. When Billy and I get together, we often argue over which of us is the prodigal son and which is the stay-at-home brother.

We can each make a credible case for being either! We end up laughing and hugging and rejoicing in the simple truth that God's grace is a gift extended to both of us no matter what.

I was crafting this sermon on Wednesday at 12:45 as parents started arriving to pick up their sons and daughters at our Pre-School next door. They have to drive right past my window to reach the parking lot. And they slow down enough for me to read the bumper stickers. On Wednesday, I saw one that said: 'student driver.' And I thought, 'now there's someone who needs a little grace, a little patience, a little kindness, a little understanding, a little unmerited affirmation.'

How I remember being a student driver: stalling the engine on a steep hill, failing to parallel park, forgetting to signal for a righthand turn, nearly bumping into our neighbor's Buick, and being pulled over by a police officer for swerving over the center line. Thankfully, my parents understood the need for a little grace. They had patience with me and even paid for the second driver's test! Student drivers need a little grace from seasoned drivers!

You and I are made in the image of God. This is made clear in the Genesis Creation story. God made all of us in the divine image. I understand this to mean that we all have a capacity for being like-God, not for being God, but for being like-God. Since the parable for today reveals that God acts graciously, that grace is God's modus operandi, it follows that we all have this capacity, to be graceful in our relationships, to be graceful in our attitudes, to be graceful especially in times of conflict and stress. I would say that God is counting on us to take a little grace with us to work each morning, a little grace with us to school each day, a little grace into all those situations that are prickly or contentious or what we used to call 'ouchie.'

The person I think of now as having modeled grace for me was my piano teacher, Joan Dufford. I would often show up for my lesson without having practiced 30 minutes a day. Sometimes this was painfully obvious. But she would look at me and say, "Well, it's coming along." She could have chewed me out, rapped my knuckles, called my mother. But she did none of the above.

From that place in her heart we call grace, she just said, "Well, it's coming along." This is how I imagine God speaking to us when, like the prodigal child, we squander our inheritance or when we make poor choices, or when we turn a blind eye to wisdom. God says something like: "Well, it's coming along." And that is when we know we are living in the greatest of hope. Amen.