

Circle of Mercy Sermon
“Prodigal Grace” Luke 15:11-32
July 19, 2015
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This is an old story – not in the sense that it was written a long time ago – but in the sense that it is a story that has repeated itself in the lives of families for thousands upon thousands of years.

Other Biblical stories recount this dynamic between siblings:

Cain and Abel – After Cain killed his brother Abel and was asked where his brother was, he responded, “I do not know where he is. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Issac and Ishmael – Sarah convinced Abraham to send Ishmael away with his mother Hagar, fearing that Ishmael would be a bad influence on her son Isaac.

Esau and Jacob – Jacob, the younger twin of Esau, assisted by his mother Rebekah, stole the blessing of his father by pretending to be his older brother, going so far as to dress up like his brother and tricking their father, who was not able to see well enough to be able to know for certain which son was in front of him.

We have known this in our families in a variety of ways – big and small. My sister frequently jokes with me about a quilt my mom has that we both love. We often make jokes (with a slightly serious edge) about it, asking my mom which one of us she plans to leave it to in her will.

A brief side note: Something that you might be interested in knowing about my sister from our childhood, is that she had a terrible habit that frustrated me to no end. She used to write my name on things that already belonged to me, all the time – my books, my beanbag, even this rock that I found in my grandparents’ garden when I was a kid. I think her secret hope was that I would get in trouble for my name showing up on things that probably shouldn’t have been written on in the first place. As an older sibling, and zealous rule follower, I was always outraged. And, for the record, I have no memory of her ever getting in trouble for this. I remember scrubbing, erasing, whiting out all of her efforts to tag things with my name.

So, a couple of weeks ago, Laura turned the tables a little bit. She sent me a text that simply said, “Thought you might want to know, I went ahead and wrote my name of the corner of the quilt” complete with a picture of herself snuggled up under the quilt on the couch at my parents’ house.

While trivial, her gentle jab stirred – ever so slightly – that internal, older sibling outrage within me. And that was just a quilt.

Jesus' parable from the book of Luke - most well known as *The Prodigal Son* – is a story that we know well. We usually hear the story told from one angle – with the relationship between the father and the younger son at the center. The older son is in the background, toiling away on his father's land – sullen and grumbling under his breath – outraged that his younger brother is being celebrated after getting away with such shameful and despicable behavior.

This is a fine reading of the text. It's what happens.

But why does Jesus tell this story here?

In the previous verses of this chapter, Jesus tells two other short parables – the story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin – both stories celebrate that what was once lost is now found – a shepherd leaves a flock of 99 sheep to look for the lost one – a woman who realized that one of her ten coins was missing, searched until she found the one that she had misplaced.

What caught my attention in all three of these stories was not only the search for what was lost and the joy that followed once the sheep, the coin and the son were found. But it's what happens after the lost object/lost person is found/welcome back – the stories don't just end there, with the finder being relieved and celebrating that the search is over and then going on – business as usual.

No, in all three of these parables, the finder calls in the community, calls in friends and neighbors and asks them to rejoice and celebrate together – that one sheep, one coin, and one son have been found, have come home, are no longer considered lost.

These parables show up when Jesus was in the midst of feeling pressure from the Pharisees and scribes. They were grumbling because Jesus was hanging out and eating with the tax collectors and the sinners. So he had some stories to tell about being lost, being sought, being found, being offered and receiving extravagant grace, and there was something important about the community witnessing these moments.

It's possible that Jesus didn't start with the parable of the father and his two sons because if his hearers had heard that story first, they might not have heard anything else he said. This story would have been scandalous to his hearers.

It would have been so completely foreign to their sensibilities about familial relationships and roles.

The younger son approached his father about receiving a portion of the inheritance. This was unheard of in Jesus' day. The cultural practice was that the eldest son received the majority of the family's land and wealth, but not until the elder of the family, in this case, the father, had died.

So, the younger son was not only overstepping his brother's rightful place, he was at some level, saying to his father, you are essentially dead to me. In a figurative sense, he was ending his relationship with his father and with his family. Word might have spread around town about the father's willingness to fulfill his younger son's request, adding to the humiliation of the older son, as well as the humiliation of his entire family.

But the father did it anyway. He did what his son asked, giving him part of the inheritance early.

We know from the story that the son engaged in reckless and wasteful behavior after leaving home. He bottomed out – losing everything that his father had given to him, taking a job as a hired servant feeding pigs, feeling hungry enough to want to eat the food he was feeding the pigs, and becoming desperate enough to consider returning home, to ask for a place in his father’s household as a hired servant. At least there, he would have food to eat and a place to stay.

The younger son returned home, and when the father saw him coming in the distance, without hesitation, without having to hear an explanation (which his son might have been practicing on his walk home – trying different phrases, different inflections), without having to see the receipts or any record for how his son had spent his money, our text tells us that the father was filled with compassion and ran to his son – embraced him and kissed him.

Even as the son was trying to get out the words he had been practicing, the father seemed not to notice what his son was saying or that he was talking at all. The father was busy calling his servants to bring the best robe and a ring and to kill a fatted calf. The celebration must begin because “the son of mine was dead and is alive again, was lost and is now found.”

“This son of mine” – for the father, their relationship never ended. Even though his youngest son had symbolically acted in a way that implied his father’s death, it seems like it never occurred to the father that their relationship was over.

If the story ended here, it would be a good story about grace.

But, it goes on. You know the older brother had to get his two cents in. He returned home from working in the field, and when he got up close to the house, he was surprised to hear music and dancing. He asked one of his father’s servants what was happening, and you can just feel his anger escalating when he heard that his younger brother had returned and his father had given him a fine robe and a ring and killed the fatted calf.

And now, a huge party was happening in his house to welcome his wasteful and disrespectful brother home. He became so angry that he refused to go in to the house. He did not want to have any part in celebrating his brother’s abhorrent behavior.

When his father came outside not just to invite him in – but to plead with him to come inside – the older brother, who clearly had considered his relationship with his younger brother to be over, couldn't taken it any more. He railed at his father – saying how hard he had worked, how faithful he had been, how he had never received anything in return and now. . .“this son of yours” comes back and receives the royal treatment after squandering away all that you gave to him, that wasn't even rightfully his yet!

He refers to his younger brother as “this son of yours” not “my brother.” He can't even bring himself to acknowledge his familial relationship with him, to call him his brother.

Without missing a beat, the father responded by telling the eldest brother that he was always with him, that all he had belonged to him. It had always been his. That had never been questioned. Then the father invited the older son back into relationship saying “we had to celebrate and rejoice because, actually, ‘this brother of yours’ was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.”

So, this is an even better story about grace. The father turned the tables on the older brother – putting him back into relationship with his younger brother by referring to him as “this brother of yours.”

Sometimes, when we witness or receive grace, it’s big and noticeable and completely unexpected – like with the younger son. The younger son had no expectation that he would be welcomed with open arms, lavished with gifts and thrown a huge party. He was prepared to come back to his family’s home, not as a son, but as a servant.

And that’s when it happens. We are received back after being lost, after breaking the rules or inflicting injury on our relationships with each other. Remarkably, we are received back in extravagant and unexpected ways that we often don’t even know how to take in because the mystery of it all is so overwhelming.

But sometimes, when we witness or receive grace, it’s so small, so ordinary – like with the older son. It permeates the air we breathe. We are surrounded by subtle grace – grace that we don’t even recognize as grace anymore because it’s always there.

And while swimming in this ordinary grace, we take on the zeal of the older son, ranting (even if just in our own minds) about why someone else received a little more than we did; tallying up the list of things we've done right, the rules we've followed – essentially cutting ourselves out of relationships and quickly losing sight of that fact that what we are complaining about someone else receiving any portion of what already surrounds us in abundance. We are blinded by our own self-righteousness, believing that we have the capacity to determine who deserves grace and in what amounts.

So why is it that we try to measure out one of the most unquantifiable, illusive and mysterious forces at work in the world?

I don't know, but I wonder if that's why in these stories that Jesus told about being lost and found – the shepherd and the sheep, the woman and the coin, the father and both his sons – that he ended each story with the central character who had lost something calling in all their friends and neighbors to rejoice and celebrate.

These experiences of grace – the big, noticeable ones and the small, ordinary ones – needed to be witnessed by the community.

In our story tonight, the brothers have hurt each other. Both have hurt their father. We have no idea where the mom's voice is in all of this. Was she in the background early in the story, coaching the younger son, like Rebecca coaching Jacob to steal Esau's birthright?

Was she consoling the older son at home, in response to how he had been slighted (and embarrassed) by his father and younger brother?

There is a lot we don't know. But we do know that this family was not an ideal family, but they were a real family. Their relationships were messy and fractured. And the community bore witness to their relationships – the messiness and the beauty.

The father, in supporting one son's journey, hurt the other son, leaving him feeling slighted and overlooked. Then, in welcoming the younger son home, the older son became infuriated all over again by his father's actions.

It's all out there in front of the whole community. The community knew when the younger son left town. They knew when he returned after having squandered his

inheritance. They were invited to the huge ‘welcome home’ party thrown by the young man’s father, and they show up to join in the welcome.

The scene ends with the father standing in the yard with his older son, inviting him inside, pleading with him to come inside, asking him to recognize the grace that has always surrounded him – that actually never left him and that will always be with him.

So, Jesus doesn’t tie the story up neatly. He doesn’t tell us whether the older brother eventually went into the house and enjoyed the party with his younger brother, whether he went into the house and sulked in the corner, whether he took off and didn’t look back. We don’t know what he did.

Maybe that’s because we need to sit with the discomfort that the older brother felt at that moment – not knowing if he could forgive; not knowing if he could publicly welcome the one who had made him angrier and more enraged than anyone ever had; not knowing if he could bear his community witnessing the struggles he faced within himself and within his own family.

How could his father have invited all of these people to witness the spectacle his younger brother – his family – had become?

We don't even know how the younger brother received the lavish welcome home from his father – if he was overwhelmed, embarrassed or relieved.

I would venture to guess that from time to time our names are written clearly, in bold ink over one or more parts of this story.

We can see how the older brother is alive and well within us – in our judgments and jealousies, when we fail to see the grace that surrounds us.

The younger brother is alive in us when we ask for or demand the absurd, expecting the world to bend toward what we demand, when we make really bad decisions, and when we are able to admit our mistakes.

The father is alive in us when we realize that we all have the capacity to extend grace in unexpected and lavish ways and when we enable behaviors or decisions that result in injury to family or community. The father is alive in us when we are

able to offer the love and grace that is needed, rather than what we determine is adequate or deserved.

Throughout it all, hopefully, the community is alive in us when we are able to show up in the vulnerable places, and in the places that shout out for joy and celebration.

The good news is that we do have some choices about where we locate ourselves in this community – that holds us accountable in the messiness and beauty that each of us bring to it.

Can you hear it – the music and the dancing? The celebration has already begun.

Won't you join us inside?

Amen.