

Scandalous Grace

by Pastor Hubert Den Draak, March 6, 2016 (4th week of Lent)

When Jacomyn and I lived in Toronto we were very fortunate to have lovely neighbours who immediately made us feel right at home in the new country we immigrated to. We could talk about everything - except their son. Their son who had left home with a big argument; so big, that they didn't want to talk to him or even *about* him, ever again.

We all know people like that son (or daughter); people no one really talks about, except in whispers, with head shaking; maybe we have one in our own family.

I'm talking about the lost ones, the runaways, the "black sheep" who blow their parents' money and break their hearts, apparently without so much as a second thought! In most cases their leaving isn't much of a surprise; in some cases it is a relief.

Jesus told this story when the "decent" people of his time criticized him for welcoming "sinners" and for eating with them. They reminded him that rabbis and teachers like Jesus were only supposed to associate with upstanding and righteous people - people like, well, themselves.

We just heard in our "Time With Youth" what the word "prodigal" means: "wasteful", or "generous to the point of wasteful"; and even though we know this story as the "parable of the Prodigal Son", you could say that all three of the people mentioned in it are wasteful in some way or other, not just the younger son!

A man has two sons - one behaves responsibly, and the other is an ungrateful brat. Yet both are estranged from their father; neither really has any idea of the depth of their father's love for them.

The younger one has had it. He's had it with his self-important older brother. He's had it with the stifling rules at home and his old fashioned dad. He can no longer deal with it all, so he decides 'to hell with it', and cuts all ties with his family.

Now in Jesus' time, when a son asked for his inheritance with his father still alive and well, he basically was saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead." Of course that's not just inappropriate to say, it's unacceptable; a proper father would not only not give it to him, but would punish him severely for deeply insulting him *and* the family. There were laws against that.

For people hearing this story for the first time, this was unthinkable. The only way to explain this ridiculous behaviour was that there must have been something wrong in that family to begin with! But Jesus doesn't indicate that at all. So regardless of what was going on in that family, the father in this story does the unthinkable and gives his younger son his share.

All we are told is that he wasted his money in depraved living. But then, the land is stricken by a famine, and the friends who had helped the rich kid blow his money are nowhere to be found when he needs real help. No surprise to that!

So he lands a job feeding someone's pigs. That would have been the ultimate degradation. Pigs were considered unclean, you weren't even supposed to touch them, let alone feed and be responsible for them; a Jewish man probably couldn't sink any lower than this, this was the pits. He is so hungry he would have eaten the pig's feed, but he's even denied that little relief. So he hatches a plan. He'll go home and throw himself on his father's mercy and ask for a job; he knows his father treats his own servants better than this.

Meanwhile at home, the older son is working for Dad, glad his pain-in-the-neck little brother has gone. But not so his father. *He* misses his son dearly, despite his ignorant stupidity. Every day the father looks down the road into the distance, where the big cities are, hoping against hope to one day see his son come back. Then, one joyous day, he actually sees him walking wearily toward home! He has to look twice, because his son looks different now; gone is the spring from his step, gone are the fine clothes. But there's no doubt: his son is coming back!

And breaking all protocol and respectable manners, he runs out to meet him. He doesn't wait for his son's carefully rehearsed speech, but immediately wraps his arms around him, brings him inside and orders that a party be prepared with his son as the guest of honour. And what animal does he order to have prepared for the feast? A calf, right. And not just any calf, but "the fattened calf"! Normally, it would have been a lamb, that would be a plenty for the family and the servants; but a *calf* would feed the whole village. This was one epic feast! Now it was the dad's turn to be prodigal and squander his wealth on his regained son.



This is "The Return of the Prodigal Son", a wonderful painting by Rembrandt. You look at it and you can almost hear the tears of joy and the breathless sobbing. But there is also tension: just look at the older brother on the right. Clearly he has some mixed feelings about it.

It's still a powerful image, because the story it tells is timeless. It could have happened 2000 years ago in Jesus' time, or three-and-a-half centuries ago in Rembrandt's time, and it's still happening today and will be again tomorrow.

In Jesus' story, the older brother is portrayed as a resentful and ungrateful soul who refuses to join the party; he

refuses to share in his father's joy; he refuses to welcome his brother. He feels snubbed; he just doesn't get it and leaves. Do you see what's happening here? The father regains his younger son, but in the process he loses his eldest... What is this about?!

Well, it's about God and it's about us. It's about how God receives us and restores us even when we're not even home yet; our God rushes out to meet us and embraces us in love. We've been hearing that since Sunday School, so we get that. Except... it's not quite as simple as that, there's more to it.

Because don't forget that Jesus told this story in the presence of some very decent and very religious people who looked down their noses at the company he was keeping. With that in mind, maybe we have to honestly ask ourselves, "Who am I in this parable?" that's a tough question, because just perhaps we may have to admit that we... are the older brother.

Some of Jesus' listeners, then and now, would find this story very offensive. The older brother types may be asking themselves, "Why throw a lavish party for an irresponsible and ungrateful jerk? Why follow the rules at all if there are no consequences to breaking them? This makes no sense, it's the world turned upside-down!

Some of Jesus' *other* listeners would have found this the best news they had ever heard: this younger son that Jesus is talking about? That's *them*, the folks who are disliked and despised for being poor or sick, or for having made some really bad decisions and are living with the fallout of it.

"There's no place like home", we often to say, but sadly, there are those who have no such home. This story makes us realize that our God gives us this kind of home, and calls us to form communities which offer that kind of welcome. It's about being a truly welcoming community - not just to people like ourselves, but also to the lost ones, the broken people, the difficult-to-deal-with people; people who seek forgiveness and healing.

I'm thinking of some of the people we may encounter when Café del Soul opens its doors to offer a welcoming community to those who don't really have one. I'm also thinking of our society's attitude toward our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, and how we deny them their treaty rights, or even decent healthcare for that matter - because they are broken, and in need of healing.

This parable is not just about biological family, it's about human community of *any* kind, including church community; *especially* church community. It's about grace and the fact that both sons lived under the grace and love of their father - even though each had their own very different slant on it. It's a story of the joy in the heart of God over those who do return to their home in God - even when it means that it makes others decide not wanting to be part of it. But that is *their* decision - not God's.

So the good news of this story is an invitation to join the party! Just be warned that the party is not necessarily just for us, but for those who were there first: the misfits and broken people, the last ones to expect a party thrown for *them*. If we can do *that*, if we can feel comfortable among them, we might be able to return that welcome and become the community that God had in mind right from the beginning. If you go away hungry and in a huff because you feel it's too much to ask - don't blame the host, but ask yourself who you are in this parable, and why.

The good news is that no matter who you are or what you have done, God's love will never run out; the fattened calf is big enough for everyone - even us.

Amen.