

"A Father's Journey to Grace"

Sermon on Sunday, March 31, 2019

Based on Luke 15

The gospel for this Sunday is written in part from the perspective of a parent - a father, a concerned, troubled dad. And while it's not Father's Day - not even Mother's Day is around the corner yet, - I thought this might be the most promising of all angles for us to enter this biblical tale. After all, the majority of us are parents. If you are not a parent, simply use your imagination! And if you are a parent who has never experienced any worry or heartache about your children, (and if you believe that the moon is square!), try to feel yourself into the heart of this father.

How does this dad experience the situation? What would have gone on in the mind of a patriarch in a male dominated society, who had only two sons - not twelve like Jacob, not four or five like the average household at the time, - all his hopes, dreams and future invested in those two young men? As he raises them, he notices that the younger one has a tendency toward risk-taking and impulsiveness, combined with a general lack of maturity. He just doesn't seem to grow up, this one. And while dad tries to reign him in and teach him good values, the old man's time is limited; he has work to do. His energy is limited. He's tired at the end of the day. His understanding is limited. He had never before dealt with that kind of a child. His motivation and imagination are limited. What to do with this chap? With no counselor in sight, no medication for ADD available, no medical system to speak of, no Stephen Minister to talk to, he does what he can. He fears the worst and hopes for the best.

Then one day, the boy had barely reached the threshold of adulthood, he goes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. He had never been a shy one, never afraid to ask for a favor. "Well, what are you going to do with it?" dad asks. "What's your plan?" - "Oh, I need to get out of here," is his reply. "See, I don't get along with my older brother, and he will take over the farm and the property anyhow, and there won't be space for the two of us under one roof. I need to find my own way. I need to explore opportunities in a bigger town. Please give me the share of my inheritance to have some starting capital, an opportunity to live and learn a trade and be productive." The younger son put on a pretty good face, maybe not quite as brazen as Sandra Bullock in the "Oceans 8" sequel if you saw that movie, but deep in his heart son number two knew that he was lying to his dad. And dad had a suspicion that his son was not completely honest. But what was he going to do? Hold him hostage? Maybe he felt a little guilty too. Had he not secretly favored his older son who had always been the "good apple?" Had he perhaps not put enough faith in his younger son? Had he failed him? Did this proposal not sound promising, like he really wanted to do something with his life? And finally he just gives him the money. "God bless you! Do something good with it! May the Lord be with you! Don't waste it, please! Did you hear me, son?"

The son is already out of the door.

Over the following months, dad hears rumors. From time to time his son's name is mentioned when he goes to town to sell his produce or when he talks to distant relatives in other parts of the region. The rumor mill always finds a way to wash ashore the debris of those who are shipwrecked in life. Unfortunately, what this father hears is not good at all, and he doesn't know what to believe and what not, but all things considered, it doesn't sound like junior has done anything to be proud of. And that's always hard for a parent. In fact, it seemed like he had lost him altogether - physically,

emotionally, spiritually. Would he ever see him again? This man felt a profound sense of sadness. And he didn't even know how to express his feelings, but it affected him terribly. He was mourning the loss of his son without even knowing what was going on in his soul. He just felt a certain emptiness.

Meanwhile, the young man, without concept for the value of money, spends it all, spends it quick, and becomes so run-down that he starts begging in the streets and accepting the lowest of jobs, just to stay alive. For the listeners of Jesus' parable, the thought of a Jewish boy eating the food of unclean pigs in order to stay alive must have added an extra element of disgust. We also know that once people get to a certain low point, it's amazingly difficult to turn it around. All the motivation specialists tell us that it's not about how many times you fall down, but how many times you get back up and stuff like that. Just about every motivation specialist has a line along those lines. And that's all nice and true, but for people in our society who have been in prison, who have a criminal record, or who are in the grip of generational poverty, things aren't as simple as just picking themselves up. Getting out of a deep hole rarely is a mere matter of individual will power. Usually several things have to come together, including help from above and from below. This young man had worked himself into a deep hole. He could have ended up dead or on the side of the street for the rest of his life. Things would have to come together, starting with himself. And as he looked up from the bottom of the pig sty, he may have said a prayer, "Lord, help me! I need help." – It's the most important of all prayers!!!

Over the years, his father had imagined his son coming home a few times. If that ever happened, he wasn't sure how he felt about it or how he would react. Sometimes he imagined being angry with him, throwing him out for good, telling him to never set foot in his house again. But if he mentioned something along those lines, his wife got upset with him. "Husband, you can't give up on our son!" As he played this scene in his mind, he was never sure how he would react if the day ever came, if in fact his son was still alive, if in fact he would ever see him again. His feelings were too conflicted.

And so I read this parable mostly as a miracle of grace - grace first given to the father, the parent in this story, before it ever reaches the son. It is the grace of being able to forgive, of stepping out of your own shadow. I would never assume that it was easy for this dad to set aside his hurt feelings, to dump his misgivings and his injured pride, to embrace his lost son like he had on the day when he was born. And yet, as described in this parable, when it happened it seemed like a natural response, not a forced act of religious heroism. He embraces this lost child. He celebrates his return. He is genuinely happy. It was a grace given to him and it would probably not have been given to him without first experiencing all the conflicted emotions, the terrible wrestling with his feelings, with God, with the whole awful situation. This father, as I imagined this parable today, was no saint, no clichéd good guy, but human as we are, injured as we sometimes are, vulnerable as we can be. When the day of his son's return comes, he surprises himself with a generosity he had not thought possible, a generosity that came from God, a grace given to him. And so, Jesus' message to us is what? When we dig deep enough in our souls, when we capture God's holy voice among all the other voices, when we break through our human sinfulness, what comes out of us in the end is grace, generosity, is forgiveness, is goodness, is life. The path to get there may not be pretty. But in the end that's where God leads you: to grace, generosity, forgiveness, goodness, life. And remember: sometimes you will surprise yourself.

Amen.