

“Redeemed by Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
March 10, 2013

Luke 15: 11-32

Where do you see yourself in this familiar story? Are you the younger son, being welcomed back into the fold after running away? Are you the older brother, incredulous at this party being thrown for your younger, irresponsible sibling? Are you the father, relieved to the point of tears that your flesh and blood has returned unharmed and safe? Are you some other character in this story, one not mentioned specifically by name, but still an important part of how this parable plays itself out? Where do you see yourself, and how do you experience God’s redeeming grace in this story of Jesus?

I appreciate Rodney Clapp’s retelling of this familiar parable. In his words: *As Jesus tells it, a prosperous landowner has two sons. The younger cannot wait until Daddy dies before he gets his inheritance. Despite the insult, the father gives the younger son his share of the family property. The youngest runs off to some first-century Las Vegas, squanders it all, and ends up eating beans and mush alongside the hogs he is reduced to feeding. Then he decides that he might return home – even if his father will not take him back as a son and treats him like a hired hand, it will be better than this.*

So home he goes. He is braced for humiliation. However as he comes over the hill in sight of his hometown, his father runs to greet him with open arms. The prodigal cannot even launch into the groveling speech about how he deserves nothing more than hired-hand status – the one he has rehearsed over many weeks and many miles – before the old man is wrapping him in the household’s finest robe and putting a ring on his finger. It is the royal treatment, literally. Before he can blink the tears out of his eyes, a fatted calf has been killed and most of the town has been invited into a spectacular party. It is a shindig of, well, biblical proportions . . .

At this juncture Jesus brings the elder son back into the picture – and big brother is miffed. He has not insulted his father. He has not shot his inheritance on prostitutes and good times. He has just slaved away, day after day, year after year, and his father has never even tossed a goat-party for him and a few of his buddies. He is mad. He will not set foot in that big, raucous, rich bash . . .

We can relate to the elder brother. He has been responsible, he has behaved well, he has prudently kept his inheritance secure. Little brother, meanwhile, has sinned (extravagantly) and enjoyed it, and for his “punishment,” he is getting the party of the year. Does big brother not have a right to at least a little resentment?

(Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 116-118).

The truth is, as Christians in America, we live in a culture which raises up the older brothers and sisters of the world. We are taught to work hard, be responsible, follow the rules, and the reward we receive will be great when our life is near its end. Most of us fall into that category: we work hard and honestly, we hope others

see us as a man or a woman of integrity, and we seek to support those who are entrusted to our care – our spouse, our children, our family. That is the exterior most of us possess when we interact with others.

But I sense that beneath that exterior of older siblings, there is a prodigal child calling out. I believe that all of us have experienced that abundant grace which the father gives to his younger son at some point in our lives. It could have been in our youth, when we rebelled against our parents, but were welcomed back with open arms. It could have been in our young-adult years, when we didn't come to church as often as we should have, but were welcomed back with open arms. It could have been when we have acted selfishly, thinking only of ourselves and in the process hurt those close to us, but in the end our relationships were reconciled by the grace, love, and forgiveness of the ones we had wronged.

I know that we have all had that experience of the prodigal son, and yet that is not what first comes to our mind when we hear this parable. Why is that the case? Is it because it has happened so far in our past that we have buried it deep in our memories so that it cannot get out? Is it because we have become so accustomed to our secure, safe lives as older brothers and sisters that to identify with the prodigal child would shatter our perceptions of life as we now know it?

In the first service today, we sang the hymn, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (Presbyterian Hymnal #298). It's a beautiful tune, and the lyrics which we sang speak of God's bountiful grace: "There is no place where earth's failings, have such kindly judgment given; For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind." The stanzas we sing praise the gracious love of the father of the prodigal.

But there are other stanzas, which do not appear in our hymnal, which speak to our natural human tendency to judge and limit the wideness of God's mercy:

"But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior who would have us
Come and gather at His feet?"

As Christians, as the church, the parable of the prodigal challenges us to our core. On the one hand, we want to receive the gracious, unconditional love of the father. On the other hand, we struggle to lay down our judgments of others who are loved and forgiven in the same way. We don't know how to feel, because we don't know who to identify with in the parable. It's not "either/or," it's "both/and."

Perhaps that is when we get too absorbed in ourselves, and we aren't able to see who the parable is truly about. Perhaps that is when we get so wrapped up in our grudges and buried behind our walls of anger that we aren't able to hear the grace-filled words of the father. Perhaps, we need to step back and realize it is

more than a story about us and the character we identify with as Jesus tells the story. In the end, it is a story about God, not about us.

Rodney Clapp continues: *In the story as Jesus tells it, the father does not berate and get all censorious with the elder brother. Nor does he defend the younger brother. Instead, he shifts attention away from both of the brothers. The father turns attention to his own love and bounty. There is plenty to go around, he says in so many words. No one will run short - "all that is mine is yours" (15:31). This is not your younger brother's party so much as it is my party, the party I throw for many. I am on the lookout for all my loved ones, near or far. I am working for them and ready to celebrate with them before they even think of responding to me or giving anything back.*

Behind Jesus' parable lies profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We humans, we all were lost, mired in sins of sensuality and greed and self-referential resentment, hip-deep in the pig slop of envy. Before we knew it, God reached out in the people Israel and then in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God raised us up and called us home. It is just not about you or me, or my sin or your sin, or my deserts or your deserts. It is about God and God's life-giving love and mercy. Every time God's active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means another, and now a bigger, party (ibid, 118-120).

In the 1980s, this church experienced a series of tragedies. Within a two year span, three families had sons die in their 20s, much too early an age. Jeff Jordan, son of Jack and Sandy Jordan; Doug Dean, son of Rev. Roger and Beverly Dean; and Andy Taylor, son of Tom and Sara Taylor. The pain and grief these families and this congregation went through was great and deep.

This past Thursday, we celebrated the life of Tom Taylor, who died after a year-and-a-half long illness with lymphoma. Tom and Sara were in the class of new members which joined John Knox a few months after the church was chartered, fifty-one years ago. But when Andy died, Tom struggled mightily with his faith. He stayed away from church for many years, for it was just too hard for him to reconcile how God could allow his son to die in such an indiscriminate way. It was an honest, real struggle, one which, as I talked to Tom about it over the years, I came to respect and admire.

I didn't really know Tom the first few years of my time at John Knox - Sara was always here, but I never saw him. Then, about six years ago, I started to see this gentleman coming to church with Sara. Before long, Tom was a regular attendee, assisting with ushering and greeting, and taking his place on what I like to call "the liar's bench" in the hallway with the other men before church.

And then, in 2008, Tom came to me and said he wanted to rejoin the church. He could have asked if it was possible to just meet with the Session and quietly be put back on the active membership roll. But he didn't - he attended a new member class with others who were joining the church, and on March 23, 2008, he was publicly welcomed in worship as a member of John Knox. And I can tell you, that

was one of the most meaningful moments of which I've been honored to serve as this church's pastor.

We read that in the midst of his demise in a foreign land, the younger son "came to himself" (11:17), a phrase which is brief in words but deep in meaning. The prodigal realizes "the profound discontinuity between who he has become and who he truly is. He does not have it figured out, but he knows something is not the way it is supposed to be" (*Michael Curry, ibid, 118*).

It takes incredible courage to take those steps toward redemption and grace. It is a great risk to pick yourself out of the mud and mire, walk the lonely road home, and beg for forgiveness. It takes an inner strength unlike any other to come to ourselves and point our lives in a new direction.

Tom never said he had everything figured out, but I believe five years ago he felt something was not the way it was supposed to be. And as I talked to Tom the last few years, I witnessed a man who was ever more at peace - with the past, with the future, with God. As we gathered together Thursday to be witnesses to the resurrection, I couldn't help but consider Tom Taylor to be one of the most courageous men I have ever known. For he trusted and believed in the father who comes running down the road, embracing his courage and risk to return, and in so doing, all the members of the family of God are reunited in the wideness of God's mercy.

And the party in heaven just keeps getting bigger and better.

Thanks be to God. Amen.