

The Gift of Life; The Life of Grace

Text: Luke 15

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Life is a gift. The Psalmist knew that. The old, familiar 100th Psalm says we are the creatures of God's hand, God has made us, not we ourselves. Life is given. We are the recipients of that miracle, and a miracle it is, really. A sperm and an ovum unite and there potentially is a human being. The human genome project is mapping out the genetic mysteries of the human being and it is far beyond my understanding, but, in any case, when we think of life, when we think of birth, we say it is a miracle, and it is a miracle in the best sense of the word, for miracle is not some event that goes contrary to the processes of nature, but rather, it is that wonderful, awesome consequence of nature itself when it is functioning according to its intention. Life is a gift and life is a miracle.

It is almost impossible these days for a pastor to make a hospital call on a new mother, but it used to be one of my favorite calls to make. Today, by the time we hear of the birth, the mother is out of the hospital, hopefully with a baby in tow. But, formerly, there were a few days of grace and it was always marvelous to make that call. There were tears and there was joy, such a wonderful experience. My favorite text was Psalm 34, verse three, which must have been in Mary's mind when she sang *The Magnificat*, "O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt God's name together," because in the face of the gift of life, in the face of a birth, we know we are in the face of a wonderful miracle. I think that when my own children were born, I was somewhat in a fog, not fully aware, lacking wisdom and experience to stand in adequate awe. I wonder if it may be that God gives us children before we are wise enough and have experience enough fully to appreciate the awesomeness of it. Perhaps when we get that experience and wisdom, we'd be so scared, we wouldn't have them in the first place. As grandparents, at least we have a second chance to enter into that with our own children if God is gracious to us.

I can remember as though it were yesterday four years ago this past Friday. Nancy was entertaining some of her friends on our deck. They were having a luncheon, as I remember, and she received a call from her son-in-law that our daughter was on her way to the delivery room, and with uncharacteristic irresponsibility, she left her guests at lunch. They could continue to eat if they

would. They could clean up if they were helpful, but she wouldn't care. She was on her way to the hospital.

And so it is - the gift of life. Life is a gift, and when we stand in its presence, we know miracle. It would be wonderful, we often say, if we could only keep them little. Not really, of course. And yet, they do grow up, and in order to become adults, they have to go through adolescence and then there comes that moment when we have to let go, when we have done all we can do, when we have prayed for them and nurtured them and shaped them and formed them as best we can, given as much wise counsel as we can. But, with fear and trepidation, there comes that moment when we have to let go. Then it is that life becomes a choice. It becomes a choice for them. What will they do with this miracle of life that is offered as gift?

In the story that Jesus told which is called the Story of the Prodigal Son, it could well be called the story of a father's unrelenting love. But, interestingly, in the very beginning of the story we learn that when the young son came and asked for his inheritance, lacking all propriety and wisdom, the father let him go. There was wisdom in that. All of us, I suppose, at one time or another have cajoled, we have pled, we have bribed, perhaps. But, we know that there is a limit. There is a time to let go.

Then the choice belongs to those who have grown up under our sheltering wings, for it is time for them to try their own wings. The younger son wanted his inheritance and he took off, and Jesus said he squandered his property on dissolute living. Just what the details of that were is totally unimportant. The fact is that he just thought it would be a party forever. He didn't realize that there could be a turndown in the stock market. Suddenly he found himself in dire straits.

Well, you know the story well. A significant little phrase has it that "he came to himself." He came to himself. He had made a choice and it was a rather disastrous choice. But, all of us have the privilege of one or two of those. Thank God he came to himself, and he began to calculate a bit and then he said, "I will arise and go to my father," because what he really wanted was a bunk and breakfast. Or, maybe a bunk and three square meals. We get to the bottom of the heap sometimes and we get desperate and we need the common, ordinary things. He was remembering the parents' home, its civility and its dignity and its adequate provision, and so he arose and went to his father without any sense at all that there was not a day since he had left that the father's heart had not been wrenched and that the father had not looked longingly down the road if perchance he might see some indication of a returning boy.

Well, he wasn't home yet. He wasn't even totally changed and transformed at this point. He was still calculating a bit. He was still figuring how he could make it on his own with a little help. And so, he had a well-crafted speech that he was going to give to his father. He had memorized that speech and said it over and over all

the way from the far country, only to be interrupted by the father's running to him, embracing him, kissing him, the father's heart breaking over him, and the father's love breaking his heart. And then, finally, he was home, for he had had an experience of an overwhelming grace. No more calculation. No more self-justification. No more rationalization. Just home in the father's arms. Rembrandt has captured it magnificently in oil on canvas, "The Return of the Prodigal." He was home. Grace transformed him.

But, it isn't only the far country that beckons those who come to years of responsibility and have to choose. There are those who dwell in the far country, even though it's only the back forty, those who never leave home, but have never been home. Those who are responsible and faithful and dependable who never kick over the traces or kick up their heels. Those who are righteous to a fault. In the parable, the elder brother who was such a person, coming in from the fields, hears the music and dancing and catches a whiff of the fatted calf roasting on the spit, and like the eruption of Mt Etna, all of his anger and resentment and hostility break forth. He had been faithful and responsible every day of his life, and he had hated every minute of it. He had not followed his younger brother's example, maybe because he lacked imagination or courage or whatever. But the reason that we cannot applaud him for his faithfulness and his righteousness is his self-righteousness, and the fact that there was no joy or spontaneity in his life. What he did, he did as onerous duty and heavy responsibility, and the resentment continued to build up until the moment of the party, of the joy, of the spontaneous bursting forth of life watered richly with grace. And then, in total alienation, he left the home, the home of which he had never really been a part.

Life is a gift, and then becomes a choice. We have to remember why Jesus told this story. Luke tells us in the opening of the 15th chapter that it was because he was receiving criticism because of his table fellowship, because of the people with whom he consorted, because he was open to all sorts and conditions of humankind, because he didn't make distinctions between clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, godly and godless. And he didn't do that because Jesus saw more deeply into the human soul than most of us. Jesus saw the turmoil there; Jesus saw the hurt and the pain, he saw the fear and the wonder there, and he knew that all of the negativity sometimes takes over a human soul, a reaction, a very clear response to a multitude of life experiences.

But Jesus never lost sight of the fact, as he looked into the depths of every human being, that there was a child of God, and so, with open arms, with an open invitation to the table, with an embrace, with a spirit and an attitude that was totally opposite of any kind of exclusion or ruling out, Jesus was able, as the father in the parable, to transform human beings, to give them an image of God as the God full of grace who creates every new possibility.

Here we are this morning, gathered in community in worship. What an interesting story it would be if all of our tales could be told. Some of us have been

here forever and some of us have returned somewhat recently. Some of us are full of grace and some of us are still not sure, and the message this morning is that grace creates the possibility for new beginnings, for new possibilities. There is always the opportunity to choose again and to be born and to be born again, for finally, the only thing that God desires for us is that we come home and that we rest in the grace symbolized in the arms of the father as we are washed with tears and made clean. If only we would come home, we would learn to sing, to sing a simple song.