

Sunday January 8, 2022
Lesson 6: Grace and Assurance for All
Scripture: Luke 15: 11-32

Context:

We continue our unit “Power and Belonging” today. On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we go to the gospel of Luke. The gospel of Luke contains many of the parables of Jesus, stories to give a heavenly meaning. The purpose of today’s lesson is to be reminded of the grace of our Lord and how it is a gift to not be abused.

Throughout the gospels, and particularly in Matthew and Luke, Jesus uses parables to make a point. Through this means of storytelling, Jesus can take social conventions and speak in the language of the people. One drawback we face with parables today is the rush to allegorize them. This means we take Christians concepts such as the identity of the Triune God and Christians tenets such as forgiveness and grace, and radically apply them to explain the parable today. While there are certainly some beautiful ways to understand the concepts of the Christian faith, we miss the opportunity to hear them as the original audience would have heard them.

The parable we read today is an example where we dive into the story and quickly assign symbolism without looking more fully at the characters or the larger context of the stories Jesus was telling. Even the title has shifted what the focus of the story should be as many Bibles and preachers/teachers give it the title, “the story of the prodigal son” instead of “there was a man with two sons.”¹ As a result of such a title, the focus immediately goes to the younger son who goes away from home and what happens to him.

For the original hearers, there would have indeed been some allusions and allegories taking place. In the first place, we always know there is something about to happen when one hears about a father and two sons. The book of Genesis timelessly reveals to us how there are always issues between brothers when a father begins to show more attention to the younger brother. Just ask Jacob what happens when you give one son a special coat and have nothing to show for the others.

Yet all sons were provided for in cases of having multiple sons. According to Jewish custom, a younger son would receive one third of the inheritance at the father’s death.² Where things go wrong in this parable is where the father takes one-third of the current state and gives it to his son. Essentially the estate is already cut up and the rest of the family will have to make do as the younger son goes to do whatever he intends to do.

When he returns, the father throws a party, acting as if nothing ever happened, leading the older brother to fume with resentment. At the conclusion of the parable, if one reads closely, there is not a full resolution as the father will have to contend with how he lost not one son, but two sons. Jesus was giving his audience something to ponder. How do we value what we have been given and how do we seek to not abuse grace or love. The father had to learn a hard lesson and we should ponder how we value things and the people we love.

¹ Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 186.

² *Ibid.*, 187.

Application

For a long time, I have honestly struggled with this passage. I always felt the older brother was presented in Christian circles in a way which was unfair and demeaning. All of us have probably at some point been in a situation where we have labored or “been good” only to have someone either fake repent or take advantage of loopholes and receive something unfairly. If we question or ask for accountability, we are labeled as “cold” or “unmerciful.”

It was not until my New Testament professor Amy- Jill (AJ) Levine wrote a book on Jesus’s difficult parables by which this parable was transformed for me. As I read all the dynamics and think about the way Jesus taught, it makes sense how this parable still provokes those in his times and our time today. As we read the parable, we are invited to see how precious life is and how we should never seek to lose anything so casually, using love as a way to appease or manipulate. The gift of grace is indeed beautiful and should never be used as a leverage point to excuse bad behavior. Themes of joy, forgiveness, and reconciliation are gifts from God and yet we should never enter into situations not seeing how those are journeys in and of themselves.

In this parable, the father messes up when he goes ahead and divides the property before his death. As a result, the household will have to adapt based on what one son desires. He will not have to deal with the consequences of his actions.

He becomes the focus of the parable because he returns. He knows the cards to play and he does it beautifully. Yet because of throwing a return party, the father is approached by the older son who has watched his father embrace someone who put the whole household at risk. He is resentful, ready to hold his father accountable for the lack of integrity. His father can only focus on the prodigal son, not seeing how he lost another as well. What I wouldn’t give to hear how the rest of the story plays out.

As Jesus does with most of his teachings, he gives us a cautionary tale. We should always practice good stewardship when it comes to our property, our money, and most importantly our relationships. In today’s world, all of those things can cause great conflicts especially when we are not fair or ethical in how we handle them.

Much as the father learned, just giving someone something they want does not mean it should happen. As seen by the behavior of the son, sometimes when we receive exactly what we want, we do not have accountability in how we use it. We get into trouble when we are impatient or greedy and we lose sight of what we have in front of us.

And as seen by the actions of the older brother, resentment can cause us to lose sight of our own self-worth and the joy in front of us. Yes, the father messed up and perhaps he needed a good confrontation. Yet who is to say the older son would not mess up in the future. We too can sometimes not see the bigger picture of things and if we act too impulsively out of resentment we can burn bridges without seeing other ways forward.

Like the father, we can lose things so precious it takes the anger and hurt of someone to see we have missed the mark. Perhaps here as we read this parable, we are reminded of how behind every piece of property, every bank account, there are relationships at stake. In the past several years, we have seen the church greatly struggle with this understanding. Stewardship is a gift from God and when we are irresponsible in how we handle it, it can lead to hurt and damage which lasts for years.

In my own life, I have two very precious nephews who are so different from each other. They are both full of life and easy to love. Perhaps my favorite moments are watching how they relate to others and how they relate to each other. The youngest is a vigilante when it comes to fairness. If he sees he is getting something, he believes his brother should get something too.

And when it comes time to say goodbye, he is quick to tell us how both brothers should receive a good-bye hug.

These little ones remind of the importance of relationships. As different as we all may be, we all deserve fair treatment in how we respond to those around us. Sometimes, the word fair means “no,” and some may not like to hear it. Other times, it may mean us asking the question if we are being good stewards of our property, our money, and our relationships. If we have to pause too long, or if we have to justify what we do, it might be time to ask what we truly value and if we are responding to this parable in the way Jesus asks us to do so.

How have you seen gestures of love and grace be abused? How can boundaries and the word “no” be important in relationships? What does it mean to be a good steward? Who are people you see as ethical and fair? How can we be aware of if we are neglecting certain relationships at the expense of others?

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