

“Graced” GPPC 3-6-16
Psalm 32, Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Sometimes it's not just a matter of hearing *what* Jesus has to say.

It's just as important to notice what *prompts* him to say it.

Luke says the religious leaders are not listening to Jesus. He's talking, but they aren't listening. They're just trying to think of ways to trip Jesus up.

But in Luke chapter 15, there's at least a partial change. Luke says, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.” Jesus finally finds a receptive audience. Of course, his receptive audience leaves something to be desired.

A few months ago, Beth and I decided to cut the cord and quit paying for cable television. We bought a cheap indoor antenna to pick up a few local channels. And we got a Roku Internet device so we could sponge free Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and other TV services from our adult children who actually pay for the stuff. Like some of you other sinners out there, we (I) soon became addicted to binge-watching “Breaking Bad” and “The Sopranos.” In case you don't know,

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“Breaking Bad” is a series about a high school chemistry teacher who learns he has terminal lung cancer. Does he spend his last months creating precious memories with his family and living into the light? Nope. He decides to become a meth producer and major criminal so he can leave millions of dollars to his family.

Then there’s “The Sopranos,” a funny, violent, poignant show about the New Jersey mafia. Is Tony Soprano, the mafia don, actually a misunderstood, nice guy because he goes to see a psychiatrist to deal with his issues? Nope. He’s a stone-cold sociopath.

One day, as I emerged from my binge-watching haze, it hit me. What’s the common denominator for these two shows? What is it? Both of these shows are about people who believe there’s nothing, *nothing* more important than getting more money. These people are like the tax collectors who come to listen to Jesus. The tax collectors of Jesus’ day are about the same as drug dealers or mafia. They work for the occupying Roman Empire, and they don’t give a hoot who they hurt to get their money, as long as they get their money.

Then there are the other audience members Luke calls “sinners.”

By the word “sinners” here he does not mean garden variety sinners like you and me. Instead, as one Bible scholar notes, these are folks who’d committed offenses bad enough to get them “thrown out of the synagogues.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Year C, 59.*) “Dear, how was synagogue today?” “I don’t know. I got thrown out!” Geez! How bad do you have to be to get thrown out of church?

But the tax collectors and sinners are the people actually willing to listen to Jesus. So naturally the religious leaders, Presbyterian pastors, um, I mean Pharisees and scribes are grumbling and saying, “How about *this guy*? Not only does he welcome lousy sinners, but he *eats* with them.” It’s bad enough to welcome these mafia/drug dealer/sleazy types, but eating with them really is too much. In the culture of Jesus’ time (and in some respects, even today) eating with another person is a way of showing acceptance of that person. And if we start accepting those kind of people, where will it lead? We don’t want to be associating with those kind of folks, because they might influence us or our children, right? As we say down south, “If you lie down with dogs, you come up

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with fleas.” Who does Jesus think he is? The hospitality and mercy Jesus shows the tax collectors and sinners is upsetting. It throws the world out of kilter. As Gerald May put it, “Grace threatens all my normalities.”

(quoted by Anne Lamott in *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 233.)

The religious leaders are upset. So what does Jesus do? Scold them? Call them names? No. He tells them three stories about God’s love. To drive the point home, he tells three stories in a row--the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin, and today’s story, the story of the prodigal son.

A man has two sons. The younger son says, “Dad, give me my share of the property that’ll be coming to me.” Most scholars believe this request from the younger son is like saying, “Old man, I’m tired of waiting for you to die. Just give me my share of the property now.”

But we don’t hear any reaction from the father. He just divides his property among the two sons. The older son would get twice as much as the younger. And in a few days the younger son grabs his loot, heads out of town to “a distant country,” and blows his inheritance on “dissolute” living.

At a recent funeral in our church, a grieving daughter came to the lectern and spoke about her mother and made a point of talking about her mother's focus in life, how she did not waste time, but used her life wisely, employing the substantial gifts God had given her to make the world a better place. We might call this "resolute living." And it's the opposite of what the younger son does in the parable. The Greek word translated as "dissolute" carries the sense of life that's scattered, dispersed willy-nilly, and wasted.

Are we living resolute lives, focused, using our time, abilities, and money for the reign of God? Or are we living dissolute lives, scattered and squandered? Can we improve? Of course, we can.

The younger son's dissolute living catches up with him. He's out of money. There's a terrible famine. He's out of state. And he's hungry. So he goes and hires himself out to work for a pig farmer. This is a problem. He's a Jew. So his work with pigs makes him unclean. An on top of it all, the pigs are eating better than he is, but nobody's giving him anything.

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So Jesus says he comes to himself, comes to his senses, and surveys his situation more clearly. “This is ridiculous,” he thinks. “My father’s hired hands have more than enough to eat, but here I am starving to death. I know what I’ll do. I’ll get up and go to my dad and say, ‘Father I’ve sinned against heaven and you; I’m no longer worthy to be called your son, just treat me like a hired hand.’”

It seems like a good plan, doesn’t it? He’s out of money and living in a new place where nobody cares about him. He’s out of options. This seems like a good plan. As the writer Wendell Berry put it, “When you have gone too far...the only mending is to come home.” (Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 184.)

So he starts for home. But here’s where Jesus’ story goes awry, where his story no longer follows “common sense.” Scholars say if a son treats his father as this son has, the neighbors would see him coming home. And they’d gather in a mob to insult him, maybe to throw rotten food at him or to beat him, because he has insulted the father. Justice, baby.

But Jesus says the younger son's father sees him from "far off." His father sees him and is filled with compassion. The word carries the sense of gut-wrenching emotion. The father is filled with compassion and runs to his son and puts his arms around him and kisses him. But wait, fathers of the time do not run. Running is undignified. Fathers don't run. Here's what a father does, crosses his arms and says, "Boy, you made your bed. Go lie in it." That's what a father does.

But not this father. This father runs, hugs, and kisses his son. And the son launches into his prepared speech, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you, I'm no longer worthy to..." But the father cuts him off before he can finish. He says to the servants, "Hurry up. Bring a robe, the best one, and put it on him. Put a ring and sandals on his feet." In other words, he is being welcomed back not as a servant, but as family. "Kill the fatted calf," says the father. "Let's eat and celebrate. My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And so the party begins. Cue the Hallelujah Chorus.

But the elder son's been out in the field working. He comes home. Hears the music and dancing. "What's going on," he asks. "Well, your

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brother's home, and your father's killed the fatted calf, because he's gotten him back safe and sound."

And the elder son is furious and refuses to go into the party. Now it's the elder son's turn to insult the father. But the father goes outside and pleads with him. Again, this is not what fathers of the time do—pleading with an embarrassingly rude son. This father is less concerned with protecting his dignity and more concerned with rebuilding the relationship.

But the elder son gets his say. "Listen," he hisses, "I've worked like a slave for you all these years, never disobeyed you, but you've never even killed a little goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours comes back after wasting your property with prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf, and throw a party big enough for the whole neighborhood!"

And we can follow the elder son's logic, can't we? "Listen, dad, it's one thing if you want to let this son of yours come home with a punishment after he blows your money with hookers. So put him up in a shack on the edge of the property. Don't let him starve. But a

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humongous party?! No. That's insulting to me. I've been working for you like a dog, and you've never had even a little party in my honor. We have a business relationship, and you owe me better than that."

But the father gets the last word. "Son, you're always with me. Everything of mine is yours too. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found."

The story ends. Does the elder brother go into the party? We don't know, do we? We don't know. Grace threatens all my normalities.

My sister Missy and I are close. We talk on the phone and visit when we can. I'm proud of what she's accomplished as a band director, flutist, and parent. But we haven't always had a warm relationship. When we were growing up my mom says she used to pray, "God, they don't have to love each other, if they just wouldn't hate each other."

Two years separate us, she the younger sister and I the elder brother. Two years meant we knew exactly how to torment each other, just the right insults, when we were growing up.

I remember one Christmas. Missy and I had been arguing. Among other things, we'd been arguing about how we to decorate the Christmas tree. Here's how Missy put the tinsel icicles on the tree, neatly, one or two strands per branch. Here's how I put the icicles on the tree, throwing huge wads at random.

My mom sent Missy into the dining room to get something out of the china cabinet. Now the china cabinet contained antique china dishes and about a dozen china rabbit figurines mom had bought or gotten as gifts over the years. My mom sent Missy to the dining room to get something from that cabinet. But we heard a huge crash. I was the first one into the room. And I knew what had happened. In her anger, Missy had yanked on the front doors of the cabinet. And she'd turned the whole cabinet over. Now she lay on the floor crying. I could see ruined pieces of china visible inside the cabinet. And broken rabbit figurines lay all around her. "Now," I thought, "you're going to get it." My mom burst through the door. But she did not shout. She did not lecture. She just picked Missy up and hugged her and asked if she was all right.

At the time, it didn't seem fair to me. And I wasn't sure if I liked the forgiveness my mother gave my sister when she'd been wrong. But now I know better. I know my mom was giving just a hint of an infinitely greater forgiveness, an even more abundant love showered on all of us.

Elder brothers. Younger sisters. Whoever we are, we all let each other down. Sometimes with dissolute, scattered, selfish living. Sometimes with judgment and envy of the gifts and grace others receive. Sometimes with our arrogance towards God and others. We all let each other down. But God our Parent, is always ready to pick up the broken pieces of our lives. No matter how shattered. No matter how messy. No matter how sinful. Nothing is beyond God's forgiveness. God is always watching, working, waiting, ready to run and throw a party of forgiveness. And God is always inviting and empowering us to forgive as we have been forgiven. You see, "When you have gone too far...the only mending is to come home." Come home. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal