

Tracy Daub
3/12/23—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 15:11-32; Ephesians 2: 1-10

STILL FAR OFF

Let's be clear. Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son is *not* a story about repentance. It is *not* a story about a son who did something terribly wrong but who then repented and was forgiven. Instead, it was a pragmatic decision that turned the prodigal son homeward. The son did not seriously consider returning home until all other options had been exhausted.

So, this parable is not about the need to repent so that we may be forgiven. Instead, the parable is a story about grace—about the grace of God offered to those who are undeserving, offered to *us* while we are undeserving.

We are exploring in our worship during these weeks of Lent, the meaning of salvation in our life of faith. Last week we examined that our salvation is rooted in the nature of God—that the very nature of God is life-giving love. God gives life, God saves life because that is who God is. Today we are going to look at one of the main forms this life-giving love takes in our lives. We often refer to this life-giving love as *grace*. If we want to understand what salvation means for us in our life of faith, we have to begin with grace.

The best way I know to define *grace* is that it is God's love and God's forgiveness for us, all rolled up into one extraordinary gift. There are two outlandish things about God's grace. The first is that it is given to people who do not deserve it. Bad people. Flawed people. People who hurt other people. People who don't live moral lives. They all get this gift. And guess what? So do you and I.

The second outlandish thing about grace is that you and I can't earn it ourselves. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. It comes as a gift. And for us who were raised with a strong

work-ethic, who believe we can work our way up the ladder of success in life, and earn our way to better things, this is an unsettling concept.

God's grace was the issue that kick-started the entire Protestant Reformation. The 16th century monk and theologian, Martin Luther, was a man tormented by his doubts about how he stood with God. He was consumed with trying to live in a way that would earn God's favor and fearful of doing anything that might jeopardize God's acceptance. Life for him became like walking a tight rope. One false step in life, one wrong decision might jeopardize God's acceptance, might throw you into outer darkness, might spell eternal separation from God. The trouble was, the harder Martin Luther tried to live the perfect life, the more he realized he could never be "good enough" to merit God's love. He just couldn't succeed. He became more and more guilt ridden, more and more anxious and despairing. Until in searching the New Testament he came to understand the good news. *We can't* earn God's love. *We can't* earn our salvation. It comes to us as a gift. We can't ever be good enough to satisfy what we perceive as God's righteous demands on us, because we are humans and we will fail. And Luther embraced the gospel message that we are saved only through the gift of God's grace—God's love and forgiveness.

Perhaps the parable of the Prodigal Son was one of the passages that helped Luther arrive at his conclusion about God's gift of grace. Jesus tells this parable to the religious leaders who felt pretty superior about their lives of righteous living. These leaders believed their faithful and careful living had earned them good standing with God and were critical of others who they considered "sinners." So Jesus tells this story about a man with two sons, both of whom, as it turns out, need the father's grace.

As we know, the younger son comes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. The division of inheritance was and still is something that is traditionally done *after* the parent's death. But the younger son wants his money now. This request will have drastic economic consequences for the entire family. To fulfill the younger son's request will mean the family will lose one third of their total assets—animals, land, and houses that took generations to accumulate. All of this would be lost when the son liquidates his share of the inheritance and walks off with the money. The younger son's request is a profoundly selfish request.

But his real sin lies is the damage he inflicts upon his relationships—especially with his father. The son is impatient for his father's death. His request amounts to telling his father, "You are dead to me." All the father's love and devotion extended to this child, this precious child he has raised and loved and cared for from infancy, are callously and ungratefully thrown back in his face. Instead of cherishing his relationship with his father, the son is only interested in the money the relationship should afford him. This is the real heartbreak of this story.

And money is also the motivating factor in the younger son's decision to return home after he has wasted all his inheritance. Only when he is subjected to extreme poverty and hunger does the son decide to return home. And even then, his plan is to ask his father for a job so he can earn his own money. Notice: the son is still thinking he can save himself through his own efforts. He just needs a job.

In the little speech he rehearses to himself about what he will say to his father we hear nothing about genuine contrition or a recognition that he has brought about great suffering and heartache. Instead, the younger son is still trying to leverage his relationship with his father to meet his own agenda and needs.

So the younger son heads home. The story tells us that “while he was still far off,” the father sees his son and runs to embrace him. That little phrase, “while he was still far off,” tells us so much more than simply the geographical distance he still had to travel to reach his father’s house. “While he was still far off” reveals the state of the younger son’s heart and soul and mind. He was still far off from understanding his sins. He was still far off from appreciating the suffering he caused his father and family. He was still far off in re-aligning his priorities around love instead of money. He was still far off in so many crucial ways.

And yet . . . and yet the father runs to embrace his son. The father does not wait to first learn if his son is repentant. The father does not wait to first hear his son apologize or express regret. The father simply runs to greet his son with love and forgiveness. This is grace. The story of the Prodigal Son is a story about grace—about the gift of grace that is undeserved and unearned but simply given in love.

But we recall that this is a story about *two* sons. When the older brother learns about the party Dad is throwing for the younger son, he becomes outraged. His wayward brother does not *deserve* a party! Instead, it is he himself, the one who remained with Dad, who worked hard every day, it is he himself who deserves the party! The older son, filled with self-righteous anger, embarrasses the father by publically refusing to enter the house. And so the father, just as he did for the younger son, now must intentionally reach out to the older son with grace.

Both sons behave badly. The younger son commits egregious sins against his family. Doesn’t even repent. And even when he confronts his own failure, he still thinks he can work his way out of the mess. And yet, while he is still far off, the father reaches out to embrace this selfish, clueless, and self-absorbed son with love and acceptance.

The older son is confident that his correct behavior in life have earned him good standing with God and others. His condemnation of his brother prompts him to act selfishly as well. And while he is still far off with his sense of self-righteous outrage, the father reaches out to him to draw him into the circle of grace.

The story does not reveal to us whether either son accepts the gift of grace or how the father's gesture changes them. So we don't know whether grace will "save" them. That is, after all the whole point of grace. It is designed to transform us. Next week we will examine that topic of how the gift of grace can transform us and save us. But for today, we focus on the gift of God's grace, given to us while we are yet sinners, given to us while we are even clueless about how we are sinners. Today we focus on the saving gift of grace which we cannot earn ourselves or achieve for ourselves.

Even though we try. Because we do. Like the older brother, we try to justify ourselves, get in good standing with God and others, by doing good works, living good lives, being good people, believing the right things, behaving the right way, living up to everyone's expectations. How exhausting! And how futile! Because we will always fall short.

Sometimes we don't care so much about doing good works as we care about simply doing work. That is an American trait: the belief that hard work and success can make us "worthy" people and can earn us the approval of others. So we just keep working harder and harder and longer and longer. How exhausting! And how futile! Or we attempt to justify ourselves as "good people" through our socially conscious efforts and priorities. Look at me, I drive an electric car. Or, I'm a vegetarian. Or, I volunteer. And we feel morally superior and justified through our awareness and activism. How exhausting! And how futile!

We can and should do good things in our lives. The writer of the Ephesians passage reminds us that we are made *for* good works, but we are *not* saved *by* our good works. The difference is significant. We can never earn God's gift of love and forgiveness. The season of Lent is fundamentally about this gift of grace. In Jesus, God's grace is made flesh—and in Jesus we see God running toward us with saving, healing, transforming love, while we are still far off.