**Extravagant Grace**

Lent IV, March 27, 2022

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32 Russell Mitchell-Walker

The last few weeks I have been praying for the Russian soldiers to have a change of heart, realize the folly of this war, lay down their arms and accept the welcome and asylum of the Ukrainian people. I have also been praying for President Putin to have a change of heart, realize the inhumanity of his invasion, and stop his so called military operation. We pray for him to repent. The question is, if he did, while we might rejoice, would we embrace him and welcome him back into the fold as the father in today’s parable did?

Jesus tells a story of a son asking for his inheritance now, before his father dies. In essence he is saying, he wished his father was dead, and this request would have been insensitive and offensive to the family and the community. For the father to agree and distribute his inheritance to both sons would have been shocking! The youngest son who requested it and then left would have been dead to his family and the community for such disrespect. It would have been even more offensive that he went to a foreign country and squandered all his money there, which meant the wealth was now not even in the community he came from, making him even more disreputable.

The oldest son would have received twice the amount of the younger, being the first born. His acceptance of this money and property, would have estranged him from the family as well. He must have not thought much of his father either. So, in essence he stayed but worked like a slave, obedient but not having much relationship with his father. This story is not about one son who is lost but two lost sons.

The younger son, after wasting all his money on partying, and illicit behaviour, has to work with pigs when a famine hits and he finds himself starving. He comes to himself, or comes his senses realizing that his fathers’ slaves have more than him and that he was been foolish – he had lost himself. The original text actually refers to his substance, his sense of self, which he lost in his dissolute living. He seeks to reclaim it when he realizes the folly of his choices, and that he is not worthy to be a son.

Now when he comes to his father’s place, before he even gets there, he does not get a chance to confess, apologize, or repent. His father runs and embraces him, so happy is he to have his son back, regardless of what he did. This would be another thing unheard of in the culture – older men and women, did not run for or to anything. It would have been seen as undignified. Thus, this is an indication that this story is about the Kingdom of God. Only in God’s shalom community would this happen. There is unconditional grace and forgiveness and then a celebration with the community which also would not have happened, as they would not be so quick to forgive such a disrespectful son. But in God’s community, grace abounds.

Indeed, grace comes before confession or repentance. The son is welcomed back before saying a word. Confession is not a condition of God’s forgiveness, it is a response to it. Grace and love lead us to confession and repentance. Those who claim “to hate the sin, but love the sinner,” or insist that sinners repent before being forgiven, may have more work to do on their understanding of God’s grace. God’s reconciling love, precedes our need for it. The challenge for us is that this is how we are called to live as well.

The story closes with the older son’s reaction who is furious that his brother, whom he will only refer to as his father’s son, is not only welcomed back but celebrated. He too has lost himself, in feeling he deserves more, that he is entitled. He’s the one who doesn’t know who he is, where he is, or what he’s doing. He’s the only outsider at this time — placed there by his own refusal to love. This story and the other two parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep which were not read today, are about loving the outsiders, and is framed as such in the beginning of the reading with the criticism that Jesus is hanging out and eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. This scripture could be reframed for our time, according to the site [Girardian Reflections](http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/lent4c/) on the Lectionary and the reflections for this reading. It could read:

“Now all the Muslims and Buddhists, New Agers and agnostics were coming near to listen to him. And the radio preachers and heresy hunters were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes non-Christians and eats with them.” So he told them this parable…”

Jesus welcomes and includes all, including the outsiders. The oldest son as an outsider, angry and feeling entitled to more, is the lost son in the end, and the story does not resolve it. What does the oldest son do, in response to his father’s grace and love? What would we do?

This extravagant love and grace of the father, turns the traditional understandings of hell on its head. God’s loving forgiveness and welcome contradicts an understanding of a God who would condemn to hell those who are not Christian or don’t have the correct beliefs, or anyone for that matter. The [Girardian Reflections](http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/lent4c/) on the Lectionary suggests:

“Hell, in fact, is to not trust the story of Jesus and to believe in a God who sends people to a place of eternal torture. Both sons in the parable live in hell to the extent that they choose to live in their versions of their stories in which love is earned. The younger son comes to see himself as bad, undeserving of any love from his father. But the older son’s problem is that he thinks he does deserve it.”

They note that Rob Bell writes in Love Wins:

“Neither son understands that the father’s love was never about any of that. The father’s love cannot be earned, and it cannot be taken away.

It just is.

It’s a party,

a celebration,

an occasion without beginning and without end.”

This story is known as the Prodigal Son. Prodigal means wastefully or recklessly extravagant and the younger son was certainly that. However, it also means giving or yielding generously or lavish. The Father is certainly that. Generous, lavish with his love and grace. Maybe the parable should be called the Prodigal Father. Our challenge is to live in the same way, to accept and offer the same kind of extravagant grace. May we live up to that challenge, to be able to embrace and welcome those who are outsiders. May we embrace all and celebrate that extravagant love and grace of God, every day of our lives.