

A sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Lent 4 C  
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God's grace is known not only in its announcement, but also in its effects. This parable of the two sons and their father is one of the most beautiful stories of grace in the Bible. And yet its effect is to rupture a family. Do the workings of grace in this parable result in justice as we know it? Or does God's justice lead us into new and reckless territory unfamiliar to those who seek justice in the earth? The parable draws a picture of divine acceptance so radical and sweeping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and outrage that turns us all quickly into the sputtering grudge of the older brother.

"There was a man who had two sons." We know where this is going. Countless repetitions of this story have turned a genuine parable with trap doors and mysterious depth into a fable with a prosaic moral tag. The story has come to coo a very small cultural wisdom in our ear: "Hey, no matter how badly you have messed up your life, pick yourself up." A ready supply of forgiveness is waiting for you, and you can start up where you left off. Let bygones be bygones. Tune up the band, kill the fatted calf, and look for the ring.<sup>1</sup>

Letting this parable speak freshly to us again, note that the prior parables have been about invisible outsiders, such as shepherds and women, lost sheep and lost coins. They have been stories about repentance.<sup>2</sup> This next one takes us right into a family of privilege, and never names repentance. And in the process disrupts both a family and what justice may mean for us.

Jesus' parables often include really odd behavior. That behavior seizes our attention and gives us a glimpse of the very strangeness of the kingdom of God. "My ways are not your ways." Announced Isaiah in the text from last week.<sup>3</sup> And a parable such as this shows how God's ways are alien to our usual expectations and our conventional wisdom. This parable is 'thick,' and anything but prosaic.

This parable unsettles our self-confident assessments of "justice." You and I presume that we know what justice is. We pray for it regularly, advocate for it in formal and informal ways. We point out injustice and guide the world toward more justice. And then we have this parable to unsettle our confidence that we can know injustice or justice when we see it.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Surprise Party (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)", *The Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, 10.

<sup>2</sup> "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (15:7) "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (15:10)

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 55:8.

In the spring of 1971 I was fortunate to study with John Rawls in a graduate course in the philosophy department at Harvard University. Rawls was within a few short weeks of publishing the tome of his life, *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>4</sup> In our proseminars about ten of us read closely his manuscript each week as a kind of last pass on its way to the printer.

The class was a magnificent adventure. I won't put you through the arguments. But Rawls identified justice with what any individual would choose as fairness, but without knowing things about ourselves that might tip things to his or her advantage. Behind "the veil of ignorance" we could describe justice without knowing whether we were male or female, rich or poor, black or white, smart or not. Justice was basically identified with fairness at the starting line of life. Given a fair starting point, individuals were then free to work out their lives in any manner they chose. The work became arguably the most significant work of political philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *A Theory of Justice* is the classic liberal statement of justice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It didn't take long for a new generation to amend Rawls work.<sup>5</sup> Many are loosely grouped as communitarians. Communitarians critiqued Rawls on many fronts. They insisted that we are as much products of our communities as the designers of them. Those communities have legitimate claims over us we may not have chosen. There is more to life than living it as an unencumbered self.<sup>6</sup> Social goods require cooperation and partnership between public and private.

The theory is not the point here. The point is that notions of justice are not obvious. Thoughtfully, and with great care, our understandings of justice do change. What you and I may be pretty sure of as just may just shift under our feet. More than that, Jesus' parable is a kind of scandal to what you and I usually identify as justice.

The young son, for example, affronts his father. His request for inheritance is something like wishing his father dead. A younger son, if he got anything at all, would be in line for a much smaller piece of the inheritance than his older brother. There is no social norm here that would compel the father to comply with the request of the son. The request itself is impertinent.

So, the father comes off as recklessly indulgent. The son's request all on its own would bring shame on the family. The father's prodigal answer to the request is foolhardy, heedless, not generous.

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<sup>4</sup> (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Among them Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Putnam, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Sandel, though many of them are uncomfortable with the communitarian label.

<sup>6</sup> "But a procedural republic that banishes moral and religious arguments from political discourse makes for an impoverished civic life. It also fails to answer the aspirations for self-government; its image of citizens as free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they have not chosen, cannot sustain the public spirit that equips us for self-rule." Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontents: America in Search of A Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard University, 1996), pp. 349-50.

The father runs to meet his son coming home in a way that was completely out of line with the dignity of being a father. Welcoming him as he does, without so much as hearing a word of confession or repentance by the son makes the father ripe for exploitation. Without contrition the son is restored fully to the family complete with robe, ring, and sandals.

Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace – God's version of justice – so eager to give and to restore that God is willing to be reckless, heedless in its giving? Is God that permissive? Whatever happened to responsibility, propriety, justice as either fairness or embedded in the community or family?

Is the returning son earnest in repentance, or is he a manipulative scoundrel? There are some who say that even though no word for repentance shows up in this story, that there is an implied repentance when the son "came to himself." The son has, after all, hit rock bottom. He has a plan about what to say to his father. But the absence of repentance language is striking and noteworthy. Without repentance the son's speech smacks of practical insincerity. The father is duped into welcoming home a manipulative loser and restoring him to his standing as son. Coming to rock bottom was all he had to do. Where's the justice in that?

So, we must ask, does the older, grudging son get it right after all? Christians need to be careful here in siding with the returning son and judging the older son a spoilsport. The older son is the consummate religious insider, and as such he is specially positioned to understand the scandal of God's grace better than most.

The older son has been taken for granted. No party celebrates his reliable, steady service. He accuses the father of preferential treatment. His angry bile revolts at the unfairness of his treatment. He has exposed the scandal of the father's reckless grace. According to the usual conventions of justice he suffers. The father's response to the younger son utterly confounds the rules, the doctrines, the sense of justice that confine the older son. Is he right?

By his conceptions of justice he has been wronged. And deep down, each of us needs to have conversation with ourselves where we reckon things in a similar way. This parable of Jesus insults our eloquent and conventional senses of justice.<sup>7</sup>

And both are invited. Both. There is no judgment for one and against the other. Both have a place at the party. God's justice unsettles our every convention of justice. And we might as well get that into the open before we get any closer to Jerusalem in this Lenten season. There, we said it.

The homecoming we celebrate today is a homecoming when there is nothing to be proud of. It is a homecoming agonizing and dangerous. Is this what grace is? Is God so eager to receive, restore, and save that God is willing to risk appearing permissive and indulgent? I mean, if God's gifts are to be strewn about so liberally, what will become of the building program, or

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<sup>7</sup> The preceding paragraphs in outline and language are adapted from Matt Skinner, "Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32," March 14, 2010, at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

social reform, or the children who still need examples to look up to? What will become of justice?

The parable ends asking you and me to complete the moral conclusion to it. Now that the father has been extravagantly gracious to both sons, how will they live with each other? Now that God has been extravagantly gracious with you and me, how will we live our lives now? Now that it is apparent that our standing with God is based neither on our contrition, entitlement, or justice will we come giggling to the party in the middle of Lent, or nurse our fears or sulk in our entitlements?

There is only one imperative in the parable. It is in the small Greek word *de*. You *must* come to the party. And with that the parable ends. The father who threw the party is still waiting to see how the story ends. Indeed, still waiting.

Amen.