

“Grace”

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I was excited to learn that the story of the Prodigal Son was one of our lessons for today. This is a story, not without controversy. It's challenging because most of us can probably really relate to the oldest son who stayed at home, did not squander his father's money on drink and debauchery, but worked hard and obeyed his father. How could his father welcome his wayward youngest son with a party and the cooking of a fatted calf? It makes no sense to him, and makes little sense to most of us. I can certainly relate to the oldest son railing at his father that he has been loyal and steadfast with little or no reward. Feeling slighted and wronged by people we love is a hard pill to swallow! What about the Prodigal son? He left to enjoy a hedonistic life while his brother toiled at home, but he returned when things got tough. Then there is the father; what are we to make of him welcoming this wayward son with open arms? But, what I would like to do is look at this story from a different angle, that what this parable is really about is forgiveness and grace.

Forgiveness and grace are intrinsically entwined. Forgiveness is easier to understand than grace. We have been told that to “forgive is divine”. “We are to forgive our enemies”, and “There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love”. Some of us forgive easily, some, not so much. Forgiving our enemies is especially difficult. Our Psalm today tells us “Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned.” I believe that God will always forgive our sins, but I contend that forgiving ourselves is the most difficult job of all.

Grace on the other hand is more nebulous, harder to pin down, a more ethereal concept. What is grace? Anne Lamott says that “sometimes grace is like water wings when you feel you are sinking.” What do water wings feel like? Is she talking about floaties that toddlers use in a pool, or the gentle hand of a parent helping us cross a busy street, or could it be, unseen, unfelt wings that buoy us up and prevent us from drowning? Is grace always available to us? I believe it is, it is a gift from God. It is that inner voice that leads us to choose right from wrong, to love instead of hate, to forgive our enemies, to forgive ourselves. Our job is to learn to listen to it, to give grace space to grow within us, as God intends. Grace is the God juice that enables us to go and see beyond ourselves.

So which comes first, forgiveness or grace? I think this question is very similar to which came first, the chicken or the egg?

It has taken me many years to recognize grace in my life, but guess what had to happen before I could see and understand grace?...I had to forgive myself! Was I able to forgive myself because of grace, probably yes. We all have times in our lives when we are ashamed, overwhelmed, angry, beaten down, etc. Trying to claw our way out of despair and grief to get to a point where we can forgive ourselves and recognize the grace in our lives, is not an easy road..

I first had to come to grips with my perceived failures, my inadequacies, my pudgy tummy and my hair that never does what I want it to do, not to mention my arthritic joints. What are my failures and inadequacies? There were/are so many beyond the aforementioned ones! First I had to recognize what they were, then try to figure out how to live with them, or better still, move away from them.

When I was in my late thirties, I hit a really rough patch. I was in a pretty unhappy marriage, I had two small children, I smoked a couple of packs of cigarettes a day, I drank a bottle of wine most nights. My health was failing, the hangovers were becoming debilitating, etc. I remember thinking to myself that I would never get well or be happy again. That ended up being a self fulfilling prophecy, at least for a while. Not long after I recognized that I probably needed to stop smoking and drinking, and leave my marriage, I had a pretty major breakdown which ended with me struggling with depression, panic disorder, and agoraphobia for several years. I could not go grocery shopping alone or drive a car during this period in my life, I was basically trapped in my house. I could not imagine how I would ever be able to turn my life around. I remember thinking that maybe I should ask my husband to drop me off on Libby Island in Machias Bay for a month or so, so that I could stop my bad habits, and face my mental health issues. I quickly realized that might not be such a great idea, so I began fantasizing about going to a monastery, where I could do the work I needed to do. Finally it came to me that maybe a mental health professional could help. It took me several years before I finally reached out for help because I was really afraid that I was so far gone, they would lock me up in an insane asylum and throw away the key. I couldn't bear the thought of being separated from my children. Those were really dark days.

I did finally start seeing a counselor (they didn't lock me up, in fact I learned that my issues were relatively common). The first thing I did after starting therapy was quit smoking, thank you Joan Miller. I attended a smoking cessation class that Joan led at DECH. After I quit smoking, I figured that I could finally have surgery on a shoulder that chronically dislocated when I least expected it. I felt that I could finally have this necessary surgery because I would not die on the operating table from a heart attack because I had finally quit smoking. After my shoulder was fixed I decided that I could stop drinking. This was more difficult, but I did do it, after several starts and relapses. Soon my depression and panic disorder seemed to be abating (I was so

surprised by this, as I thought drinking helped my anxiety). I was able to drive and go grocery shopping. In other words I was no longer a prisoner of my own making.

When I finally stopped drinking, I felt so much better, that I began waking up really early in the morning and going to the pool to swim (because now my shoulder worked properly). I also enrolled in classes at UMM. My marriage was still unhappy, but as I felt myself getting stronger, I realized that I could do something about that. My swimming passion took on a new zeal and I decided I was going to swim across Gardner Lake. I began working with a retired Navy Seal, who trained me for open water long distance swimming. I was now driving to Ellsworth three times a week to train with him. The summer of 1997, I did swim across Gardner Lake, I also swam the length of Bog Lake. I also left my husband.

So why am I telling you all this and how does this relate to the story of the Prodigal son? We could liken my foray into drinking and smoking as similar to the Prodigal son's life of prostitutes and parties. We could also liken it to the son who stayed behind and suffered in silence. Unhappily doing as his father wished, with no rewards. Actually our stories weave in and out of each other, but the true meaning of our stories is that we were all touched by forgiveness and grace.

The Prodigal son came home. He had to forgive himself for leaving, and for his life away from his family. He had to find the courage to come home and face his father. I imagine he worried about coming home and what he would say, how he could explain himself. He even planned ahead what he would say "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." The Prodigal son had to experience many hardships before he saw the light. Each hardship, and then his decision to make a change in his life, is an example of grace. First came the knowing of the error of his ways, then his forgiveness of himself, then he was touched by grace in order for him to move forward to a life filled with love, family and meaning.

The father was certainly touched by forgiveness and grace. He had to forgive his wayward son and appease his angry eldest son. He did this with unconditional love for both boys. To me, this is one of the truest examples of grace in the bible. How easy it would have been to turn away his youngest son, while continuing to take his older son for granted. This is not what happened. The father welcomed his returning son with joy and gifts, while assuring his oldest son by saying to him "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." (pause here) This is such a beautiful example of love, forgiveness, and grace.

I wish Luke had told us what happened to the youngest son. I like to think that he came to understand his anger and was able to forgive himself for feeling this way about both his father and his brother. That he then was able to embrace the grace and love that his family enjoyed.

My journey began with a bit of debauchery, a fair amount of anger, and a lot of guilt. While my journey is not over, I have been able to forgive myself. The moments of grace occurred when I quit smoking and drinking, when I swam across a lake, when I found the courage to leave an unhappy marriage. I have often thought of my grace moments as a bit like a snowball that you roll until it gets bigger and bigger. Each step, each time I was able to forgive and allow grace into my life, the snowball got bigger and better. This kind of journey is interesting. While much of the work is internal, it takes a village. My external supports help keep me standing tall. My husband Don, my children and grandchildren, my church family, my friends. This is life, it is blessed, and there for the taking, it is also the only one we have. We need to embrace it and learn to recognize when we are given the gift of forgiveness and learn to recognize the gentle touch or sometimes the great big push of grace.

Amen.