

“God Moves...To Meet us on the Road”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church

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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcome sinner and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So, he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is

mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'''

Imagine with me, this scene. It's a big bedroom, frills and pastels. Mom, mid-30s, is seated at one of those big, lighted vanities putting on her makeup. A beaded gown is stretched flat across the king-sized bed. She's in a dressing gown and her hair has been pulled back and clipped with one of those spring clips like you use to seal the potato chip bag – she'll get to the hair, when she's finished with the makeup. Her daughter, age 6, full of energy and questions is bouncing around the room chatting up her mother while her mother brushes on foundation.

- Mommy, why are you getting so dressed up? Where are you and daddy going?
 - Your dad and I have been invited to a party.
- Is it a birthday party?
 - No, it's a fancy party, kinda like Cinderella's Ball – there will be dinner and a live band and dancing and Champaign and men in tuxedos.
- Wow, mom – that sounds fun, but what kind of party if it is not a birthday?
 - It's a coming home party. Our neighbor's son has been away and he's home now and his dad is throwing this huge, expensive celebration party in his honor. His dad even bought his son a custom tuxedo so he will look his best for the party.

- Wow, what did he do to get such a big party? Did he just finish college or something? Has he just come home from like the army? Why is his daddy throwing this big party for him? Where has he been?
 - Well honey, he's been in Las Vegas. Several years ago, he asked his dad to give him - right now, the money that he would someday inherit, then he went to Vegas and blew through all of it – he spent all of it on booze and bad women. He disrespected his father, left his religious heritage, and came crawling back smelling like an alley and cheap perfume. Best we know, he never did apologize for any of it. So, his dad is throwing him this big party. Do you like these earrings with this dress?

What about this makes sense to you? This is the most popular parable ever told by Jesus and it is completely offensive. This kid needs to be taught a lesson, not getting fitted for a new tux. We expect any loving father to allow a way back for a wayward son. We expect the gospel to allow for repentance and a way back into the life of faith. But come on, not a party.

And remember, Jesus tells this story in response to being challenged by the Pharisees and scribes – the religious leaders of his time. They were not challenging his theology. The accusation was that this guy Jesus welcomes sinners and sometimes he even eats with them. They are critical of his open arms response to sinners. So, in response to being accused of partying with sinners, Jesus tells a story about a party being thrown for a sinner. This parable intends to jolt and offend. Disturbing our comfort is what parables do best.

I ran across a great essay on this parable two weeks ago. I read the essay, and said, “*Wow, this is really good*”, then I looked to see who wrote it and it was my pastoral counselor and friend, Bill Harkins, who is one of the priests at the Cathedral of St. Phillip across the street. He noted in the article that myths and parables have opposite functions. Myths, he said, are written to make us comfortable with the familiar. Parables intend to disrupt our comfort. To quote John Dominic Crossan, a parable “*shows the fault line beneath the comfortable surface.*”¹ Maybe we've read and heard this parable so many times that we've worn down the rough edges. Maybe it is hard for us to be shocked by this story – but if we are open, we might get jolted anew by the scandalous grace that's here – because we are reasonable people and there is nothing reasonable about this story.

Any reasonable person would respond differently to these two sons. If a son demands his part of the inheritance, saying in essence, “*you are dead to me already old man*” – if that son cashed out and went away and squandered it all - if he spent every penny until he was so broke that he had to take a job that violated his religious tradition, like working with hogs would have been a violation of the Jewish law – if that hungry son came home asking for bread to spare, any reasonable parent would allow some path

¹ J. William Harkins, *Feasting on the Gospels*, p. 88

back. *“Here son, here are some of your old work clothes. Go prove yourself to me and to your brother. Show us that you have learned your lesson.”* Any reasonable parent would... but the disruptive part, the unreasonable part - is the live band and the corks popping and the ribeye's.

In fact, the party is what makes the older son so mad. Did you notice? The older son does not register a complaint about his rotten little brother being offered a path back to being restored. It's the blame party that's driving him mad. It's the music coming from the big house – a party being thrown for his little brother who for the last few years has been living a party on dad's dime, while he, the older brother, stayed home and did the chores. The older brother asks the question that most of us are asking if we are paying attention, *“What is the meaning of this?”* The party means forgiveness. *“How does this make sense?”* Shoes, ring, fatted calf, music, forgiveness – a party is just not a reasonable response. It is not reasonable, it is offensive.

One preacher said of this parable that many people *“have not felt the full impact of the offense of grace”* that the parable conveys.² *“The offense of grace?”* Just that phrase is disrupting. And offensive grace is extended at every turn, by the central character in this parable.

Most protestant Christians in America refer to this as the Parable of the Prodigal Son because that's the heading ascribed in the King James Version of the Bible, but that heading throws off the focus of the story. This is the Parable of the Loving Father. The focus of the story, all along, is the father and not either of the sons. In fact, the parable begins with this line, *“there was a man who had two sons”*. The story is about a man who had two sons. And the shock and scandal of this story is that both undeserving sons got everything, everything – nothing withheld – not because of what they deserve but because the father is scandalously merciful – throwing a party that you and I might not have even attended if we had been invited. *“Who throws a party for a playboy?”*

And the Lectionary places this story right here in the middle of Lent, when we sing sad, slow songs and talk of ashes and introspection and repentance. We are signing up for introspective prayer retreats and giving up soft drinks – while the father in this story is hiring caterers and dancing the Cha Cha Slide in a conga line, to celebrate a guy who spent the inheritance on late parties and fast women.

But God's love is just that scandalous. God is active, seeking and more expansive than we dare. The father shakes off the normal restraint of a Palestinian male, the father betrays the social customs related to father and son relationships, the father breaks every rule of responsible behavior and lifts his robe and runs down the dirt road and embraces his son with his sprawling love, before the boy has a chance to utter a word.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation*, Luke, p. 186

And God's love is so radically vast that God runs at the same reckless speed toward everybody. Everybody. God runs, arms open toward Rush Limbaugh and Nancy Pelosi. God runs full sprint toward Lori Loughlin and Harvey Weinstein. God even loves Florida Gators. It is an offensive grace.

However scandalous, God's love runs at every broken and devious and polarizing person like a parent who would welcome home a lost child. And thanks be to God that you and I are caught up in this unreasonable forgiveness. This offensive grace comes our way too.

The father answers our critiques that a party in this case is unseemly, unreasonable. He says to the older brother, "*But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.*" God still throws a party when we come home.

During this season of Lent, you and I sit and pray and repent. We give inventory to our betrayal. We measure off the distance between how we are living and who God called us to be. Then we look up from our prayers with tears, hoping God will hear our failure and allow us to crawl back into favor. And when we look up from our shame, we see God running toward us with arms outstretched, yelling back at the big house to get ready for a party.

The unreasonable, and offensive and beautiful truth is that God's forgiveness is running toward you – God's love has its arms flung wide and God is wanting to welcome you home. Will you say yes? God still throws a party when we come home.