

Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-10
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Sermon September 15th, 2019

God's Gift of Grace: Coming Home!

I invite you to join me in my time machine/aka hippocampus, the part of the brain that is responsible for remembering events, and take a trip back with me to the summer of 1991. The sun is shining. Michael Jackson's latest hit "black or white" is what everyone is singing. Thank God, the whole white glove thing is not so popular anymore. People are now dressing up like the Terminator or cousin It from the Addams family. Then there are all the cool hair cuts we see from the puffy long hair, to the Rachel hair cut, to the love for curls hair style. Of course, we can't forget the new grunge look, or the boyband overly gelled short hair look. At least, by the grace of God, people have finally had enough of the mullet. Oh no, there is one over by the pop machine still hanging on.

On top of being a ten-year-old child trying to live in this diverse pop culture era. Knowing that whatever hair style I choose will dictate my peers for the next ten years. I am also dealing with the outfall from my parent's separation, and the impact this separation is having on my little sister, my Mom, my Dad, and myself.

And just when I think my plate is full, my best friend who I am inseparable with is now moving away. Across the city, which for a child is like light years away. Let's just say I am really struggling with all the changes I am facing.

So, here I am. Sitting on the couch. Wondering if I'll ever get used to all these changes. I hear a knock on the door. It is my best friend. He has recently seen his new house and is excited to show me it. He asks if I want to join him on a bike ride to his new place. Without thinking, I blurt out: Yes, I'll go with you. We jump on our bikes and start our journey across the city while the song "born to be wild" plays in my mind. We bike passed all our old hang outs. We then start venturing into territory I have never seen. I am getting a little anxious. We have journeyed pretty far away from home. I wonder if we will make it to my friend's new house today.

The sun has started to go down. I suggest to my friend that it may be better if we start to head back. Maybe our parents are getting worried about us. After some persistent convincing, we decide to head back the way we came. It is harder recognizing the landmarks as things get darker. But, as we start to notice more and more landmarks that are familiar I start to feel calmer. Hopeful that soon we will be home.

As we are leaving a convenience store that is about ten minutes from home a car pulls up to the side of the road. Now I'm really scared. My heart must be pounding 140 beats

per minute. What if this is someone who is going to try and harm us? As the person pops out of the car I notice something familiar about his balding head. It is my Dad. Now my fears have turned into trepidation as I am sure I am in for a punishment that will last three life times. My Dad approaches my friend and I. His belt is still securely fastened to his pants. This is a good sign. Right? My Dad bends down. I am waiting for something. Maybe he will yell or swear at me. What's this? He reaches out to give me a big hug. He is just so relieved to see me safe and sound. The anxiety and fears he must have felt. I don't think I have ever seen as big a smile on his face as I see in this moment.

On the way back to my Mom's house my Dad tells me how he looked everywhere for me, and how anxious my Mother and he was. And how happy he is to find my friend and I safe and sound. I guess even the police were looking for me. I still think I must be dreaming. My Dad not showing even a little anger. Of course, reality sets in when I walk through the door and my Mom is screaming at the top of her lungs, grounding me long enough for two lifetimes. I just got out last year.

As I get older I have more and more trouble remembering things about my childhood, but every time I hear our gospel narrative this morning I think of this memory. I think of the amount of grace my Dad showed me. I think of how much he cared for me to give up everything he was doing and search for me. I think of how fortunate I am that he found me and brought me home safely. I think of the joy on his face in that moment he found me. I think of what God looks like when God reconnects with us.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus is hanging out with tax collectors and sinners who have probably struggled over and over again to have a relationship with God. Jesus is taking a big risk by hanging out with people who are hated by many. Tax collectors were seen as working with Rome. The people often felt cheated and betrayed by these tax collectors. Sinner was a label for someone who wasn't right with God. Who wasn't right with the religious community. Jesus is facing ridicule, death threats, and possible exile. How can someone who says they are a representation of God hang out with people who have perceivably wronged God and God's people? This is how the Pharisees are interpreting Jesus' actions.

However, we see that the tax collectors and sinners are connecting with Jesus. They are reconnecting with God. This should be a celebration, not a time to be critical.

Jesus goes on to use two parables to reflect what God's gracious love looks like. A shepherd who is willing to take an incredible risk to find the sheep that has wandered off. A woman who tears her house apart to find a single coin. Two parables that are extreme examples, but are meant to show what lengths God will go to be in relationship with us. They are meant to shock and awe people. Showing how deeply

God cares about our well being and wants to be in our lives. Willing to risk everything to be with us. Even God's only Son.

Sometimes when we hear this gospel we can get into this mentality of us and them. We go to church, and some of the people in our lives that we care about don't. We wish they could come back to church. We pray every night for God to bring them back. In some ways these parables give us hope that God will not give up on reaching those loved ones who have disconnected from God.

Yet, as I hear this gospel this morning, I don't think of us and them. I think Jesus is speaking to all of us. We all at some point or another have a moment or a period of time where we feel disconnected from God. Where we find ourselves wandering. Maybe we are experiencing an illness or tragedy that has us questioning our faith. Maybe our lives become overwhelming and we find ourselves struggling more and more to connect with our faith. Maybe we are going through a period of discernment as we encounter information that challenges our way of thinking and believing. Maybe we experience some wound from a community of faith and have had trouble reconnecting. Maybe we are dealing with things in our lives that are making it harder for us to be the loving people God created us to be. There are lots of things that have us wander from the flock.

What is so reassuring is how motivated God is to come to us when we face these challenges and gather us back in. Forgiving us. Showing us amazing grace. Giving us new life.

When I was standing there scared and vulnerable, I witnessed God's amazing grace through my Father's compassion and understanding I experienced that night. I believed God was guiding my Father to find me, and to have the grace to see a child confused and hurt by everything that had happened in his life. Just wanting to come home.

In our reading of Exodus, Moses witnesses God's amazing grace when God relents on punishing the Israelites for creating and worshipping the Golden Calf. After taking time to listen to Moses plea. God could see the impact of all the suffering God's people experienced in Egypt. God understood they are a broken people longing to feel safe. Longing for guidance. Longing to feel at home. Struggling somewhat with their patience as Moses was gone along time.

In our reading of 1 Timothy, Paul retells his story where he witnessed God's grace on the road to Damascus. In the midst of persecuting and killing Christians, Christ comes to Paul and calls him to become his disciple. Become his apostle. Instead of choosing to punish Paul for his misguided acts.

Everyone of us probably has a story or two to share about how God came into our lives when we wandered off from the flock, and gathered us back in. A story where we came away from that encounter feeling loved, comforted, forgiven, and renewed. Empowered to stand with Jesus at the party with the tax collectors and sinners in our context. Understanding how hard life can be, and how everyone's story or reason for wandering is much more complex than what we see on the surface. Showing them, this same amazing grace God shows us. Rejoicing every time someone comes home.

Let us pray, loving God, we give thanks for your amazing grace that touches our lives when we wander from the flock. May we trust in your grace, and feel empowered through your grace to reflect this understanding and love to others in our lives who have wandered from the flock. Rejoicing every time someone comes home. **Amen.**

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