Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Sermon March 27th, 2022**

*God’s Puzzling Grace*

Jesus is inviting people who have been rejected by the community to sit and eat with him at his table. Tax collectors who are perceived as traitors to God’s people. Representatives of the very empire who are oppressing them. Sinners who have been labeled unclean, and therefore, should not partake in any community activities until a priest has made them clean.

Especially table fellowship, which is a substantial act of hospitality. An act where we welcome people into our personal space. An act where we share intimate stories about our lives. An act where we share our food, our eating habits, our culture with those who sit with us. An act where we become vulnerable to one another.

Who do you invite to your table (**Image**)? Usually, family and close friends. Right? People who are meaningful to you. People who you have a trusting relationship with. People you feel safe around.

We rarely invite people to our table who we don’t know, who we don’t trust, who we feel threatened by, who we see negatively.

Table fellowship is a substantial act of hospitality. So, it is understandable that some people in the community struggle to see Jesus sitting with people that they have rejected. People who they don’t trust. People who they feel threatened by. People who they see negatively.

Well, in response to this protest, Jesus shares a few parables with us to try and explain why tax collectors and the unclean are welcome at the same table as those who see themselves as committed to the laws of their faith.

In this morning’s gospel, we hear and reflect on the famous parable, the prodigal son, or what many scholars like to call, the loving father parable. In this parable there are three main characters. The youngest son, the oldest son, and the father.

The youngest son rightfully decides to ask for his inheritance early, so he can move to the city. Many people did this if they didn’t plan on working on the family farm.

Unfortunately, his life in the city didn’t go according to plan. He made some bad choices, and ended up losing all his wealth. Instead, of going home, he chooses to find employment with a pig farmer. Let me repeat this. A pig farmer. Remember pigs are seen as unclean, and so, are untouchable. He feels so much shame for not being able to make it on his own that he would rather farm pigs, the untouchables, then go home, and face the “I told you so” conversation that is probably awaiting him.

It is only when he is mistreated so badly by his employer, and on the verge of starvation, that he decides to take a chance and go home. Believing that his father will take better care of him even after he squandered all his wealth.

We can relate to the younger son here. We have stories we could share where we made some bad choices, and felt shame. Where we struggled to face the people who we hurt. Where we struggled to receive the forgiveness and hospitality that sets us free from shame.

Some of us have stories where we are shamed, rejected, marginalized, because of our gender or sex or race or ethnicity or sexual orientation or financial status or age or something else about ourselves (**Image**). Sometimes we feel shame, because the people in our community treat us differently due to something that is a part of who we are versus something we say or do to hurt others.

We can relate to the younger son. We have all felt shame at some point in our lives.

Then there is the older son. The son who decides to continue working on the family farm. The son who will one day take over for his father, and keep the farm going for future generations. The son whose inheritance will be fully realized when his father takes his last breath.

The son who is hurt when his father decides to throw a huge party for his younger brother who returns home after squandering everything he had. Now, the problem the older son has with this party isn’t necessarily that his father wants to celebrate his brother’s return. It is that throughout his entire life, his father has never thrown him a party. He felt like he has been there with his father through everything, and yet, not once, did his father ever throw him a party.

And even though the older son’s father is trying to reassure him that everything that belongs to the father also belongs to him, this doesn’t seem to take away the sting of this feeling of unappreciation.

Like the younger son, we can relate to the older son. We have felt unappreciated. People have at times taken us for granted. Whether it is our spouse or our children or our parents or our friends or our employer. Sometimes we feel unappreciated (**Image**).

It is understandable that the older son struggles to see the fairness in what is going on here. He does everything that is expected of him and is left without a party while his brother acts carelessly and gets the fattened calf.

We can relate to both sons. And on some level, we can relate to the father. When someone in our life is struggling, and becomes estranged to us. It hurts. It leaves a void in us that is hard to fill. We think about them often. Wondering what went wrong. Hoping things could be different.

When this person actually comes to see their struggles, and seeks healing. We rejoice. We celebrate, because we see new life in this person. We experience reconciliation with this person (**Image**). We can see why the father runs to embrace his younger son when he comes home. We can see why the father wants to throw a big party to celebrate this occasion.

On some level, we can relate to the father.

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, this parable is hard to understand in its fullness. I don’t know if we can reconcile with the fact that the older son is treated unfairly here. That he doesn’t get a party too. I don’t know if we can fully grasp why Jesus would eat with those who many in the community see as harmful to their wellbeing. I don’t think we understand the magnitude of God’s grace. It is something out of this world. It is puzzling.

Our rational brains can’t wrap our minds around this concept called grace. Fortunately, as children of God, we are given the gift of faith. So, to, believe that God’s grace is doing something in our lives, and in our world, that is forgiving us, healing us, and renewing us. Even if we can’t understand or see it. That the older son and the younger son will see life in a whole new way through this grace. That the people who are concerned of who is sitting at Jesus’ table will see how this grace and hospitality transform people into something new. Both those who witness this grace as well as those who receive this grace.

God has given us the gift of faith to also believe that God’s abundant grace leaks into our hearts, so that we too, are able to sit at our table with the marginalized, the rejected, the younger son. That we too are able to sit at God’s table as the younger son, as the marginalized, as the rejected.

Let us pray, gracious God, thank you for welcoming us home. Thank you for welcoming us, who fall short of your glory, to eat with you at your table. Open our hearts to welcome the marginalized, rejected, unloved people in our community to our table to eat with us. **Amen.**

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