

Lent 4, March 27, 2022

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

It would be all too easy to see this as a tame story about a naturally kind and welcoming God.
 After all, how unusual is it for an adult child to return to the homestead
 after finding it impossible to make it on his or her own? Not very.
 And, these days, plenty of parents are opening their arms
 to welcome their children home...because it makes good economic sense,
 and because the parents love their kids enough to put up with the inconvenience. . .
 or worse, the end of the “empty nest” they dreamed about.

But when we treat this story of the prodigal son
 as a “Hometown Boy Wins Comeback Player of the Year Award,” we miss the point.
 It is not our willingness to change and turn around and go home
 that makes God welcome us home; nor is it our remorse or regret or sorrow
 that compels God to set the banquet table.

In other words, none of us gets to throw our own party. . .
 because this is not about us and our attitude or behaviour.
 It is about God’s grace toward us. And to help us grasp that truth—
 and to be grasped by it—let me tell you three short stories.

The first is from Tom Long, who, I have mentioned (and stolen from) before. . .
 who is a marvelous preacher in his own right
 and an exceptional teacher of preachers at a seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

He tells the story of a student of his who went jogging with his father
 in their urban neighborhood, and as they ran,
 the son shared what he was learning in seminary about urban ministry,
 and the father, an inner-city pastor, related experiences of his own.

At the halfway point in their jog, they decided to phone ahead for a home-delivered pizza.
 As they headed for the phone, however, a homeless man approached them,
 asking for spare change. The father reached into the pockets of his sweatpants
 and pulled out two handfuls of coins.
 "Here," he said to the homeless man. "Take what you need."

The homeless man, hardly believing his good fortune, said, "I'll take it all,"
 scooped the coins into his own hands, and turned to go on his way.
 It only took a second for the father to realize
 that he now had no change for the pay phone.
 (All of us are of the age to remember “pay phones”).

"Pardon me," he beckoned to the homeless man.
 "I need to make a call. Can you spare some change?"
 The man turned around and held out the two handfuls of coins.
 "Here," he said. "Take what you need."

The second story comes from an essay in a religious journal
in which a woman was reminiscing about her father.

She said that when she was young, she was very close to her father.
The time she experienced this closeness the most
was when they would have big family gatherings
with all the aunts and uncles and cousins.

At some point, someone would pull out the old record player
and put on polka records, and the family would dance.
Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka;"
and when the music of the "Beer Barrel Polka" played,
her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say,
"I believe this is our dance," and they would dance.

One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods
and the "Beer Barrel Polka" began to play. . .and when her father
tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance,"
she snapped at him, "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!"
And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

"Our relationship was difficult from then on all through my teen years," she wrote.
"When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair,
half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him,
"What do you think you're doing?"
He would look at me with sad eyes and say, "I was just waiting for you."

"When I went away to college," the woman wrote, "I was so glad to get out of his house
and away from him and for years I never communicated with him.
But as I grew older, I began to miss him.
One day I decided to go to the next family gathering,
and when I was there, somebody put on the "Beer Barrel Polka."
I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father,
tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance."
He turned toward me and, with tears in his eyes, said,
"I'm so glad. I've been waiting for you."

Story #3 is told by Michael Garofalo who told it years ago in an interview
on National Public Radio in the US. It is about a 31-year-old
New York City social worker named Julio Diaz.

Now, Diaz customarily followed the same routine each evening,
ending his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early,
just so he could eat at his favorite diner.
But one night a few weeks earlier, as he stepped off the No. 6 train
and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached
 and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet.
 And as his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said,
 "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something.
 If you're going to be robbing people all night,
 you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy,
 and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Diaz replied,
 "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars,
 then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner...
 and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome."
 Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair
 walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly after they sat down, the manager came by, the dishwasher came by,
 the waiters came by to greet him. Diaz remembered,
 "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?'"
 "No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."
 The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher."
 "Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?"
 Diaz asked him. "Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen,
 "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay because you have my money.
 But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."
 The teen "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet.
 Said Diaz, "So, I gave him \$20... I figured maybe it would help him...."
 But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife.

Now, I know that on the surface, it appears that in all four of these stories--
 including the one from Luke's Gospel—it appears that repentance comes before grace. . .
 that confession comes before forgiveness. . .
 that a change of heart and mind comes before acceptance.
 But, you know, there isn't a single instance in the Gospels when Jesus requires
 repentance before he extends forgiveness or healing or hospitality. Not one!

In the gospels, remorse, regret, sorrow, a willingness to change—
 all those elements which make up repentance—
 all of them are always a response to God's grace, not a prerequisite for it.
 Grace always comes first.

In other words, it is grace that really matters. . .that makes a difference. . .
 that finally wins the the heart of one son and will win the heart of the other.
 It is grace, and grace alone, that wins the day.

To those who in need, God says “Take what you need.”

To those who are broken, wounded or lost, God says “I’ve been waiting for you.”

To those who are hungry or afraid, God says “Let me give you something to eat.”

Sometimes grace, so freely and lavishly given, so astonishes us
that all we can do is change course. . . change direction. . . turn around
and head back on the road to God—back on the road toward home.

And that unconditional and undeserved grace of the One
who loved us to death and loves us into life—
that grace, once experienced, grasped and understood—
that grace can change everything. Everything.

So, come. Come to this meal of grace, this meal of reunion and reconciliation;
this meal where relationships are mended and healed,
where hopes are restored and the dead are made alive again.
Come to the banquet that Christ spreads before us. . .
because it is a feast meant for us—a meal, a banquet, a supper, a sacrament,
a feast and a celebration meant to welcome us back. . .to welcome us back home.

Amen. SDG