

“The Cost of Following Jesus: Accepting the Grace”

Series: *Accepting Grace*

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Rev. Mary Henderson Bowman

March 30, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

My friends, there is nothing that gets our attention quite like a scandal. We easily remember the scandal of Prince Harry leaving the royal family. Wall Street and individuals were scandalized when Bernie Madoff was arrested for cheating people out of \$64 billion. And it is hard to keep up with the scandals that emerge out of Hollywood on almost a daily basis. There is nothing that gets our attention quite like scandal.

And Jesus — in His own way — understood this. Jesus loved to inject His stories with elements that surprised His listeners and even scandalized them. A little scandal in a story can catch our attention and make us tune in a little closer.

Oh Jesus began His parable out mildly enough . . . “there was a man who had two sons.” But the second sentence, it blows the story wide open . . . “The younger of the sons said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’” Just like that — scandal! Just like that — Jesus reminds us that there are no Hallmark families. Just like that — Jesus lets US know that HE knows that there are no perfect families. And the family Jesus is describing — it is experiencing some real scandal.

From all that we can tell about Jesus’ times, it would have been absolutely shocking for a son to ask to have his share of the property while his parent was still alive. It is not hard to imagine the hurt the father felt to hear the son’s seeming preference for his inheritance over his father’s presence. The son not only rejects the father, but also selfishly puts the father’s well-being at risk. You see, in order to generate the son’s inheritance, the father would have had to liquidate and give up a significant portion of his own livelihood and his own means of support.

We can barely wrap our heads around the son’s request . . . when a bigger scandal emerges. Instead of punishing the son for such a disrespectful request and setting him straight - especially in front of the neighbors, the father scandalously grants the request— and even goes a step further. The father elects to treat each son the same. He also grants his older son his inheritance. He officially divides all his property between his two sons. We can just hear the murmurings of the crowd around Jesus: What kind of family is this?

But Jesus doesn’t pause to address the scandal in the story. Instead, He follows the younger son into a distant country.

And we too will follow the younger son . . . But before we do, we have to ask a question. Jesus tells us that this man had two sons . . . so where is the other son when all of these scandalous things are happening within his family? The older son is conspicuously absent during this time of upheaval.

This is especially true because in Jesus’ day, the oldest son was tasked with the role of reconciler when it came to family matters. It was up to the oldest son to smooth out family arguments and disagreements. And yet when the younger son poses such a disrespectful request to his father, there is no older brother present, no reconciler trying to talk sense into his younger brother. No concerned older brother when the father divides his property.

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No caring older brother when the younger brother departs.
It is as if there were no older brother at all.
There is no kinship, no connection.

My friends, this conspicuous absence marks the third scandal in this story.
It would have been absolutely unheard of for an older brother to neglect his duty to his family. It would have been shameful for him not to honor his father by being present.
We can't help but conclude that both sons have dishonored their father and that both sons are lost in their own ways.

As we re-join the younger son, we realize that Jesus isn't offering explanations for why the older son was absent any more than Jesus is offering reasons for why the younger son asked for his inheritance.
It seems that Jesus is either content to let us try to fill in the blanks — or is asking us if the reasons matter as much as the actual disunity.

We continue to listen as the younger son goes from riches to rags . . . earning the description of prodigal with his wasteful and extravagant spending . . . before finding himself alone, destitute, and starving.

Jesus tells us that it is at this low point that the younger son “came to himself.”

What a remarkable phrase that holds so much human and spiritual complexity!

We sense self-understanding, transformation, repentance, and ownership of his own choices and the path ahead of him.

This moment of revelation marks an acknowledgment that he has gotten lost, wandered into wrongdoing, and become disconnected. It is as though he was blind to his father's love all along, but now he can see . . . and in the seeing, he heads for home.

And “while the younger son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he RAN and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

This beautiful homecoming reminds me of Abraham Lincoln's response to the question of how he would treat the southern states when the Civil War ended.

Lincoln's response was simple . . . “I will treat them as though they had never left.”

How scandalous is that! The scandal of grace!

The power of the story of the younger son is that it feels personal. Most of us can personally relate to a time or times when we wandered from God and followed after the ways of the world, before we came to ourselves and turned for home wooed by the song of love and grace. When we are lost, the gift of grace is amazing indeed.

You may be aware that prior to this parable, Jesus told two other parables about lost things. He told a parable of a lost sheep, and He told the story of a lost coin. Jesus gave both of these parables nice, neat endings with the lost items being found and celebrations being held.

In the parable of the two lost sons, we have a celebration but we do not have a nice, neat ending.

The older brother forces us to acknowledge that there are a variety of ways to be lost.

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When we finally meet the older brother, he is still distancing himself from his family. He is still holding himself apart — content to judge his father and his brother from a distance. The older brother is still blind to the love his father offers and still disconnected from his brother.

We hear this in the exchange between the older son and the father — the father who goes out to him . . . just as he did the younger son.

The older son describes his brother as “that son of yours.”

And in that simple statement denies his kinship and his responsibility.

What we can't help but notice is that the older brother has not yet come to himself.

He is caught in a space where he begrudges the grace and forgiveness extended to his brother.

He is unable to respond to his father's plea that he come and celebrate what was once lost and now is found.

And this is where Jesus ends the story.

There is no neat, tidy ending.

We do not know whether the younger brother's change of heart sticks or whether he gets restless again.

We do not know whether the older brother will come to himself and join the celebration.

The writer W. H. Auden once said that a real story is not one that we read but one that reads us.

It seems that Jesus is inviting the story to read us.

There are questions to wrestle with . . .

How are we like the younger brother?

How are we like the older brother?

How are we like the father?

Can we accept the grace like the younger brother did?

Can we struggle with the unfairness of grace and how it feels very fair when we get it — but extremely unfair when others do, especially those who are unworthy?

Can we remember that God's divine grace is powerful but so is the human grace we receive from one another?

Can we learn to appreciate the wasteful, extravagant love of the father . . . and with God's help learn to share it?

With God's help, can we accept the grace and extend it to others?

If we could . . . THAT would be truly scandalous! It would be an amazing grace!

Amen.