

“Full to the Brim: Prodigal Grace”
Luke 15:11-32

A side story from the last Super Bowl captured people’s attention. It was the story of two brothers playing against each other. Travis and Jason Kelce (picture) played against each other in a Super Bowl game for the first time in NFL history. Their mother got some attention as she had to divide her loyalty. Which one to support? Here is a little video about this: <https://youtu.be/nGp3VjzEMeM>.

Siblings’ rivalry is not anything new. Throughout history, we hear about such rivalries. They are often imbedded in a scarcity mindset. We have seen this recently with the Royal family in England. The rivalry among the brothers which seems so silly to us, but it speaks about a deeper human issue. That is why the Bible has many stories of siblings competing with each other. Think of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. So many struggles and divisions over resources and esteem.

In our Bible story for today from Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells a parable that turns the logic of rivalry on its head. The Bible project presentation of the story: https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/gospel-luke-3/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video.

Luke 15:11-32

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.’”

Jesus was faced with a challenge from people who had given up on several groups in their society because they considered them sinners and thus hopeless. These religious leaders thought they were better than others in God’s eyes. They questioned Jesus’ behavior of having relationships with those so-called sinners. So Jesus in kingdom of God fashion, turned the tables on them. Sinners in those days were people whose occupation or vocation, by its very nature, would cause them to break the Mosaic Law (law of Moses) or to work outside the Law. Some examples of sinners were: those who sold their inheritance (that was against the teachings of God because the land was a gift from God to be kept in the same family), pig keepers, shepherds, those who raised pigeons, those who left the covenant, and Samaritans. So sinners were not just people who committed a personal sin. They were those who were also socially rejected because of some public definition of acceptable professions and social groupings. This was also true of tax collectors. They were rejected by society because they were seen as occupation collaborators. They collected the taxes owed to the Roman and Jewish governments. They were legally allowed to take a portion of the taxes for themselves.

Against the accusation of being someone who approves of public sinners and tax collectors, Jesus responds with a series of three stories about losing and finding, the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. These three parables are supposed to help the people get a different perspective on Jesus’ ministry with the outcasts of society. These parables were designed to help people see how expansive and extravagant God’s grace really is.

In the parable of the prodigal son, we know how unconditional the love of the father was for his son despite all of his problems. Jesus was saying that to human beings, God’s love may seem foolish, but that is the norm of the kingdom of God. Those who seem to be lost are not lost to God. There is enough grace and love to go around. The story of the prodigal son or the lost son is a story about God’s grace and love for the whole world, the redemption of Israel and the rebirth of Israel as people who know the grace of God in their dealings. It is about their exile and redemption. They have been exiled from grace by living as if greed and control were the only ways to happiness. But through God’s grace, all will be redeemed, those who are clearly lost and those who don’t even know that they are lost, like the older brother in the story. The jealous reaction of the older brother is a reflection of the reaction of the religious leaders to those who are labeled as sinners in society. But even those who are self-righteous and think highly of themselves are offered God’s grace.

No matter where we see ourselves in this story, God's grace is there for you! If you see yourself as the prodigal son, God still loves you. If you see yourself as the righteous son, God still loves you. If you see yourself as a rule follower, God still loves you. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Depending on the season, we may find ourselves in all of these roles. We may even find ourselves identifying with the father who forgives and loves unconditionally. In all of it, God's prodigal grace is a reason to live extravagantly instead of living timidly. Today, we are invited to hold onto this image of the prodigal grace that welcomes us home to our true selves.

We are going to reflect on this passage using the famous painting by Rembrandt: The Return of the Prodigal Son. (image of that on the screen). The following commentary is from Daniella Zsupan-Jerome. Rembrandt painted the end of his life: <https://youtu.be/0TgUikT-Oc>. "The image is one of deep human awareness, mature spirituality, and a quiet invitation to contemplation. Rembrandt invites us into the parable at the moment when the younger son has just returned home, broken and begging for forgiveness. As his father embraces him, the older brother on the right looks on, while their mother, barely visible, looks on from the top left. Two additional figures, perhaps members of the household, observe the scene. The most visible faces are those of the father and the older brother, both illuminated and complex in expression. The father's face is one of mercy: he is overcome with tenderness as he draws his younger son to himself. His face is both paternal and maternal as he harbors, embraces, and comforts the young man. His focus is singular: to love this broken, wounded, and tattered person who has crumbled against him.

The older brother looking on is a tour de force of psychological portraiture. As opposed to the father's all-out, open, and self-giving embrace, the older brother is an embodiment of closedness and reserve. His hands are clasped in front of him, and he is at a safe distance from the poignant embrace between his father and brother. We expect to see a frown or look of disdain on his face, but instead, the expression of the older son is a face of deep sadness and self-awareness that reveals his gaze as directed more inward than out at the people in front of him. The older brother's expression shows us the brokenness and repentance that we see depicted in the physical appearance of the younger brother. Both are aware of their brokenness, and this awareness has cast them down to rock bottom. Both will need the healing, forgiving mercy extended to them by the father.

Contemplating Rembrandt's painting, one has deep compassion for the older brother. He is under the weight of his brokenness yet still stands apart from the loving embrace that would free and heal him. We pray for courage for him and for us too, to step forward into those arms.

We are going to end with reading only the words of the father in the parable. I invite you today to listen to the grace that God will communicate for you through them. I invite you to focus on the joy and love that are implied in these words. It is like the words of Frederick Buechner who said, "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

I will read this three times in Lectio Divina style: "Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!...Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Amen.