

The Offense of Grace
Lenten Series on the Prodigal Son
Luke 15: 1-3; 14-20
Don Lincoln

A colleague told me about sitting in church with his young son next to him, and the minister delivered a sermon on this prodigal son parable. When the minister got to the point where the father sees the son returning and races out to meet him, the minister said, “Throwing wide his arms, the father said....”

At which point, the little guy sitting in the pew next to my friend whispered, “YOU’RE GROUNDED!”¹ You think?

Last Sunday we stopped the story as the younger son was figuring out his plan; how he was going to approach going home and facing dad and seeing if he can get a better job than feeding pigs. Some readers think he’s humble, repentant and apologetic. A lot of sermons have been preached that way. There are certainly commentaries that say that and some scholars who suggest that.

I, on the other hand, suggested last week perhaps the young prodigal was more conniving than contrite, coming back to the father’s well a second time; trying to work another deal for himself. Either way you look at it – whether repentant or working the angles – the son has a speech all rehearsed for when dad sees him standing in the front doorway.

And here’s the amazing part of the story; the son never gets to the front door. He doesn’t even get on the porch.

Remember, this is the son who basically wished his father dead. When you ask your father, “Give me my share of the inheritance now!” that’s like saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead.

The father – who had every right to cast the son out of the family – to not welcome him back into the village because he shamed the whole household for what he’s done – Jesus tells us what kind of dad this is in this story.

Here’s the first point: the father sees the son **while he was still far off**. Did you catch that? It goes by very quickly. While he was **still far off**.

Do you wonder if dad had the habit of glancing down that road each time he passed the living room window? Just in case? Has dad been quietly lingering by the front gate every evening in the twilight in the hopes one of the wayfarers on the road would be his son? Is that why he sees him from such a distance? Because he’s been watching, waiting, hoping?

And when dad does see him, what does he do? Does the father wait in the doorway, blocking entrance to the home, listening for a sufficient apology from his son when he comes up the steps?

There was a ballet composed by George Balanchine – first done in 1929 in France– and it's the story of the prodigal son inn ballet². In 1979, the famed Mikhail Baryshnikov played the Prodigal in New York City. An Amazing production! But, in this scene the author of the ballet gets it all wrong. For here, a stern and austere father stands in the doorway, grim face, waiting, arms crossed – waiting for the young son who comes groveling, like a dog slinking home who knows he's in trouble.

That's not the picture Jesus gives. "But 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."

Remember that well-rehearsed speech? The one he was sitting in the pigsty crafting? The one the boy was practicing the whole way home – getting the phrases just right? He hasn't spoken a word of it!! The father has not heard ONE WORD. He sees him far off and Jesus tells us, his father saw him, he was filled with compassion; and he **RAN**. The word used here is the technical word in Greek for a footrace in the stadium. Dad is not just jogging; Dad is **SPRINTING!** Down the walkway, down the road!

Jesus' hearers would've picked up on this, because Jewish gentlemen do not run! Eastern dignity demanded a leisurely pace. The Talmud, interpreting Jewish law says "a man's manner of walking tells you what he is." And.....the higher the status, the slower the walk.

Imagine Jesus' listeners at this moment – laughing on the one hand at the image, and horrified on the other at the thought of not only running, but running to meet this no-good, shameful scoundrel!

But it's not only the running; it was what it **TOOK** in order for this Jewish gentleman **TO RUN!** My friend and Middle Eastern missionary Ken Bailey researched this story – and he **TRIED** running in the robes worn by Jewish gentlemen in those days. You can't! The only way for the father to run is to hike up his robe and put his underwear on display for the whole villate. With every bounding step, his Fruit of the Loom out in the open! Oh, the humiliation, Jesus' listeners would say – the neighbors would have a field day with this!

Are you and I starting to get a glimpse of what is hidden underneath the surface in this story?

The father, in humility, leaves his standing and stature behind; he doesn't worry what the neighbors will think or what his son deserves. He could have given the boy a thrashing, required heavy penance, sackcloth and ashes. Or grounded him! But the father's compassion rules. He runs, throws his arms around the boy, and kisses him

again and again. And all of this before sonny-boy can get out one word of “Father, I have sinned....”

If you were here last week, you understand why I wanted to ponder whether or not the son was repentant in the first place – because some would say it was his repentance that lends him to the father’s love and I want to say, “No!” There is no repentance on our part that earns us this love of God.

This is a parable of incarnation.³ It describes the heart of the Christian faith. The initiative of a God who acts first, who humbles himself in Christ – a God who renounces standing, and reputation, and power and glory in order to run to us, to welcome us, and to walk with us. The one who empties Himself, takes on our shame and goes to the cross for you and me. Goes to the cross before we ever get a word out....

Before we get a word out – God comes running. Before we state our case, God comes embracing. Long before we say “I’m sorry,” God has already seen us from afar – because God has been looking for you and me all along. And when God sees us in the distance, God runs down the road to greet and kiss you and me, and throws a party on our behalf. “Because THAT.....”, Jesus says, “...is what this God is like”.

Remember why Jesus told this story? I mentioned it in the introductory sermon. Because the Scribes and Pharisees were grumbling. Grumbling about the fact that Jesus welcomed sinners and actually sat down to eat with them.

This was Jesus’ way of saying, “You bet I do!!!”

“Put on the best robe – the one dad wears to weddings and funerals. Get it out of the dry cleaner’s bag. Put on the signet ring – the sign of the family. Put shoes on his feet – “cuz all God’s chillun’ got shoes!” Kill the prime beef reserved for the grandest feast in the home. Rejoice with me, for my son was dead, and is alive.”

Raising dead sons and daughters to life and throwing fabulous parties for them is God’s favorite way to spend an afternoon, full of hugs, kisses and resurrection.⁴

Preacher Will Willimon tells a story of years ago when he was a young pastor in a church, when his oldest daughter Sarah entered the church’s talent show. Just four years old, she sang, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” sitting cabaret-style on the piano that Willimon played in accompaniment. Willimon writes, “With no bias, I can tell you that Judy Garland never sang it better!” After the last note, the audience erupted in applause. The two of them took a bow, then hurried side-stage where Willimon swooped his daughter up, twirled her around, hugged and kissed her, and said, “Oh Sarah, I love you.”

One of his church members was standing right there, looking at them. She said to Willimon, “I wish my father had done that.” A little slow to catch on, Willimon said, “You wish your father had played the piano?”

She said, “No, I wish my father had loved me.”⁵

“Don, are you OK? Are you alright?” (recalling line from story told at children’s message about a car wreck and my father’s FIRST question to me).

Jesus started this parable to speak a word to the Pharisees and the Scribes, but I’m certain they were also a convenient foil for all the sinners in the crowd that day. Those with the wayward hearts and minds; the lost souls; the profligate spendthrifts; the secret wanderers.....folks just like you and me.

This story, Jesus said, is for YOUR heart. And...your craving and desire to fill that empty space within you is over. To know there is One who says, “Are you alright? Are you OK?”

God, even now, is running toward you, lifting you up, twirling you, hugging you, saying, “I love you.” “No matter who you are, or where you have been, no matter what you have done, you are God’s beloved child.” May you and I know that welcoming love anew this day.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1. Homiletics, March 2007.
2. William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 2007.
3. Ken Bailey, The Cross and the Prodigal, 2005.
4. Robert Farrar Capon; Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus, 2002.
5. Willimon, op. cit.