

March 13, 2016

“The Unlived Life”¹

Lent # 5- Come to the Waters- Community-Take 2

Reminder of Sermon Last Sunday- The younger son—Came to his senses—returned to a prodigal father—a father wasteful in sharing grace

Community—not just a biological family—but a community

Sermon taken from the book *Dust and Glory* by David Runcorn

Scripture Luke 15: 1-3, 25-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. ² The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ *Jesus told them this parable:*

²⁵ *“Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. ²⁷ The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. ²⁹ He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ ³¹ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”*

Prayer

¹ This sermon is the chapter- “The unlived Life” from the Lenten Devotional book titled *Dust and Glory* by David Runcorn. All the italics are quotes from his book.

“ If you hadn’t ended up doing “x”, (becoming an engineer, accountant, receptionist, teacher, nurse, full-time homemaker) what would you have done instead?’ Have you ever begun a dinner conversation with that question? It usually leads to a lively discussion about the ‘what if’ in our lives or the ‘if only’ stories of the lives we might have lived, had things turned out differently.

Some of these ‘what if’ lives are playful fantasy-- If only I were born in New York City rather than a farm in the Willamette valley of Oregon—I would have been a broad way star. (Probably not—but one can dream!)

Some of our ‘if only’ lives are matters of serious regret- if only my mother had a mammogram as soon as she felt a lump rather than waiting several months until after a family reunion—she may still be alive today.

Adam Phillips writes that ‘our unlived lives-the wished for lives- are often more important to us than our so-called lived lives.’

It would be interesting to know how the older son in this parable story of Jesus would have answered the ‘what if’ question. This older son appears to have been a model son and heir, responsible and dutiful. Where was he when his squandering brother limped home penniless? He was outside—working, of course.

As Jesus began to tell this story, it was the outcast- those considered the sinners in the community, who came near to listen. Now, in the story, the 'good' son is coming near but, at the sound of the celebrations, he stays outside. As his father tries to persuade him to join the party, all restraint gives way. From beneath the surface of a faithful son, a festering well of bitterness overflows. He disowns his brother (telling his father—this son of yours') and accuses his father of slavery, neglect and favoritism. Here is a personality eaten away because of an unlived life- resentful, judging, envious, angry, ungrateful, unforgiven and loveless. While the younger son wasted his inheritance by living too wildly, the older wasted his by never living at all—he was prodigal—or lost too.

*"You never gave me anything," he grumbles. "It was yours all along" is the father's reply. It was all there to be entered and lived. Remember, both sons received their share of the inheritance. The older one too had choices, but his share went unused and uncelebrated. **So in the end, who was the furthest from the father's home and love? One son needed to return to his true home from the far country of his own indulgence and impulsiveness. The other must find a way home from the bitter fruits of his own 'goodness'.***

Where does this story of the two sons find you?

This past week, I had an evening conference call in my role as a mentor to a group of people who are in the process of becoming certified candidates for ministry in our Oregon-Idaho UMC annual conference. One of the mentors was leading a short discussion on the Wesleyan understanding of grace. Wesley wrote and talked about three manifestations of grace- prevenient grace—before we are even aware of it, God’s grace is present in our lives; justifying grace- the grace that occurs when we in the story of the prodigal’s –come to our senses- and become aware of how we have separated ourselves from God’s grace and turn back; and sanctifying grace- the grace that we live out throughout our lives as we engage in both personal and social holiness.

He used the story of the Lost Sons and the Welcoming father as he talked about these three manifestations of grace. One of the candidates shared that although he is the older son in his biological family, he identified with the younger son in the story. He lived a wild and reckless life for many years. He was welcomed back into his parent’s homes on three separate occasions after his life fell apart.

He shared though about his relationship with his younger brother—the one who was the dutiful son—who did well in school, who was responsible and dutiful. He shared that many years after he ‘came to his

senses' and made changes in his life—returning to school, to seminary and now pastoring two small churches for the first time—after all of this, his relationship with his younger brother remains strained. He understands why his younger brother does not fully trust these changes that he has made. He shared that when this scripture came up in the lectionary- he was not ready to preach on it because he is still living it out.

With tears in his eyes, he completed his sharing by saying that he hoped that a full reconciliation between he and his younger brother would occur someday.

It is difficult to understand the extravagant grace offered by the father in this story if you have lived your life as a responsible, loyal, by the rule person. I admit that in my own life- I identify much more with the older son and there are times when, like the older son in the story, I struggle to show grace rather than judgement.

The shock of this story- especially to those who are the most religious audience- is that the younger son who takes such wildly irresponsible risks with his desires is received home with unconditional joy. The brother who has been 'good', never partied or risked his dreams, never celebrated the free gift of his inheritance, is standing outside in the misery self-chosen exile.

*Repeated social surveys reveal attitudes of blame and little sympathy among the better-off public for those who fall into debt or whose choices or misfortunes have left them needing help to rebuild their lives. Religious practice can result in the same hardening of heart. **Goodness is not grace.***

When this story is discussed in church groups, the sympathy is often with the older son. The younger son did wrong, but he got the party. It is not fair. Sacrificial, hardworking, faithful people can be very resentful when the attention and excitement is focused on the outsiders: “you never made a fuss of me like that’.

In an imagined conversation, author Michael Gallagher asks Jesus, “When you look at us, at me, what grieves you most?”

Jesus replies, “The unlived life. The prison of smallness. There are terrible evils that can spring from the shrinking of the heart.”

What is our unlived life that Jesus would grieve? What are our prisons of smallness?

In a village in England several years ago, there was a series of outreach/ mission worship services—(I imagine a new pastor coming in and wanting to share the good news story outside the walls of the church)

The faithful members of the congregation went along with this series of worship services but were a bit hesitant about it.

On the final evening of the worship services, there was an invitation to any to come forward as a mark of new commitment to Christ. There was a pause and then, to the surprise of all, one of the most respected, lifelong church members walked rapidly up the aisle nervous and tearful. She told of a homecoming, "I have been running for 20 years," she said.

She had been living a 'good life'- she had been doing all the right things but she recognized that there was something missing in her life. She responded to the invitation to live a life of grace rather than a life of goodness.

My friends, the great good news of this parable story told by Jesus is that with whomever we identify with in the story- we are all welcomed home with extravagant love. Grace is available for us all—we are not only shown grace, we are called to live in grace and extend grace to others.

Last week, I shared a quote by Anne Lamott that I want to share again: *"I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us."*² Whether we identify with the rebel son who was welcomed home with unconditional

² Anne Lamott

grace or the elder son who lived a life of 'goodness' and was given the invitation to enter into the celebration of grace— our lives will be transformed as we live more and more into the mystery of grace. We will begin to show grace to others.

Jesus does not give us the ending to the story. Does the older son stay outside of the celebration or does he enter into a new way of life based on grace rather than goodness

Today, once again in our worship, you will be invited to gather around this simple table and enter into the celebration of grace. Whenever we take Holy Communion, we say 'yes' to grace, we say 'yes' to the surprising God who runs to meet us wherever we are and usher us into a celebration..

So, come to the table this day- wherever you are on the faith journey.

Say yes to God's grace.

May it be so. AMEN.