

Two weeks ago, Pastor Diane preached about Grace, and what it feels like to be Loved by God. The point of our passage and sermon this morning is that what to the recipient is UNMERITED GRACE, a gift from God, may be so unwarranted, so extreme, so Amazing, that others are OFFENDED!

This is not one of Aesop's Fables with a Moral at that end "If we just come home, all will be restored."

The stumbling block of this story is that the younger son has to learn to want to say "Father" to the one who gave him everything, and the Elder son has to learn to say "Brother" to the one who took everything.

There was a man in one church whose name was Ed. Ed was Patriarch of 5 generations in the congregation. Ed was a self-proclaimed "Grouch" and Ed was proud of it. He could find fault in anything. He had a derogatory slur about every different racial ethnic group. Ed regularly wore a frown, was grumpy, was a pessimist and in no way Politically Correct. Ed had an oversized mustache that was stained yellow from years of nicotine. But truth be known, if you could get behind the façade, Ed had a heart of gold and was a loving sweetheart, but he did not want anyone to think that. Ed liked being a Grouch. He liked being thought of as a Grouch, never seeing JOY, always finding fault and complaining about other people. Have you ever known someone like that? Ed is the image I have of what it was to be a Pharisee.

We tend to have this image of Jesus: with children in his lap, or surrounded by his disciples, each of whom had a golden halo round his head, those are the ways Renaissance Painters depicted the Messiah. But Pharisees saw something altogether different. Tax Collectors, Prostitutes, Sinners, Lepers, all the rejects of society flocked to Jesus, and the Pharisees saw this as an indictment of him for choosing bad company. The Pharisees believed that God punished the wicked and rewarded good behavior, so they talked about him: "Jesus receives sinners, enters their homes and shares meals with them!"

This is the context for Jesus telling these three parables of Joy. But more than simply satisfaction, Jesus' Parables describe JOY AT GRACE at being Blessed by God, as OVER THE TOP. Like the Wedding Wine and the Catch of Fish that were a SUPER-ABUNDANCE, the Joy of those GRACED by GOD is Ecstatic!

He told them of a poor shepherd who knew and loved his every sheep. He led them to lay down in green pastures, he led them beside still waters, keeping them from all threats of evil. When one went missing he worried himself sick. The Shepherd would leave his flock in safety and search everywhere, until finding the lost. And finding the lost, does the Shepherd go back to work? NO, he carries the sheep on his shoulders, and here is the really OFFENSIVE PART: HE THREW A PARTY! Jesus described the Faithful Response to Grace as a PARTY!

Jesus told of a poor woman who had 10 Silver Coins, perhaps this was her Dowry, or the whole of her life-savings: 10 Silver Coins. Losing one, she is not satisfied that she still has 9, NO, she searches by every method possible, the Greek literally says "SHE KEPT ON KEEPING ON SEARCHING" until finding the lost coin, then calls her friends and neighbors to REJOICE.

If Ed the Grouch WERE a Pharisee, what he heard Jesus saying was "GOD is a Foolish Old Woman", "God risks the whole flock"; where Jesus' point was God's Joy at GRACE IS EXCESSIVE and EXTREME.

God never saw the sin of the sinner, only the repentance of the Lost being Found.

Years ago, I had preached a sermon about GRACE, and someone stopped at the door and he said:

"But does not the Sinner have to REPENT BEFORE THE GRACE?" And I had a knee jerk reaction of saying:

"No, it's just the opposite." I have not spent a lifetime researching the question, but from what I recall

"Biblically" the Grace of God always come first, unmerited, undeserved, and as such GOD'S LOVE initiates a response from us of REPENTANCE...

Case in point,

While Judaism had an assumption of Progeniture: that the Eldest inherits everything, Jewish Law dictated that upon the death of a father, the first-born would receive 2/3 of the estate (A Double Portion) and the younger Children would receive what was left. SO we know there is a problem when, "A Man had two sons and the younger came demanding his share". Realize what an OFFENSE this is! The younger son is saying to his father, "I wish you were dead, so I could have my share of your property NOW!" Instead of reacting, the father gives whatever is asked. And the son promptly wastes all he has received. The Greek is actually more excessive, that what he does is "to squander and scatter his soul". When all he had was lost, he was so morally and financially bankrupt as to hire himself out for money to pig farmers.

Now I have known Pig Farmers, my wife's family raise pigs, but to 1st Century Judaism, nothing could be more Offensive, it was literally Not Kosher. That "he came to himself" carries the meaning of the passage, but the literal phrase means "When he came to his senses", he makes up his mind that his Father's slaves were treated better, so he goes to plead for a job, but he has not yet said anything to his father as REPENTANCE.

Here is the Amazing, Unmerited, Unprecedented, Offensive Grace...

In ancient Middle Eastern Culture, adult men did not RUN, they Never RAN as that would display emotion, passion, even Need, and perhaps look foolish.

AND according to the Law as written in Leviticus, if a Child were disobedient, bringing shame upon a Father, as this Prodigal had done by wishing his father were dead, then wasting himself, NOT ONLY the Father but the whole Community had Responsibility to Stone the child.

So when the Father sees the Lost returning home, The Father Runs not only to receive him, but to shelter him from the Neighbors in an act of GRACE.

The Prodigal is never able to state his rehearsed speech, to REPENT. In reply to the extent of His Father's ACT OF GRACE in running to embrace him, the Son says: "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before You." The LOST does Repent, but the initiator, the first Actor is the Father extending GRACE.

In the Bible, particularly in the teachings of Jesus, a fun game is to consider IS THERE ANYWHERE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT WITH A STORY LIKE THIS? There is the Story of Abraham's Grandson Jacob called ISRAEL, whose favorite son Joseph was lost, who in a time of famine, when the Family's hope is lost learns Joseph was alive and providing for them in Egypt. To suggest that the Patriarch "Israel" was a PRODIGAL, or that the whole family of Israel was LOST and in need of return to the Father, was OFFENSIVE!

But remember that the Father had two sons. When the Elder Son learns that his Father has EMBARRASSED their family by running, to greet, shelter and welcome home the family sinner who wasted his soul and inheritance is an OFFENSIVE GRACE. A Grace so Offensive that the Elder Son makes a scene by standing outside the door of their house during the Celebration, refusing to enter in. ONCE AGAIN, now with the Elder Son, the Father does whatever is needed, by searching for him and extending the GRACE of HIS LOVE that the Elder Son ACCEPT THE GIFT of his Brother's RESURRECTION from the dead. The question becomes whether this Son will REPENT by reducing his Offense and Accepting the Father's LOVE.

A few weeks ago, 90 of you came to a film I showed about THE REFUGEES OF SOUTH SUDAN. The Media had nicknamed these refugees "LOST BOYS" because they fled their homes and grew up without any Parental Supervision. In 2005, at the request of one, I went solo into a Warzone, as the Ambassador of these Refugees in America, hoping to find their families who had remained behind during 30 years of war. We were able to re-unite over 100 families. But while with them, I came to claim not only that they had found each other, but that in 30 years of Civil War, with their Children gone, these were LOST FAMILIES.

Some of us are like the YOUNGER BROTHER: People who have wasted our lives, scattered our Souls. Some of us are like the ELDER SON, the PHARISEES, The GROUCH: Who worked hard and smolder with resentment because Life is not fair.

But the fact of the matter is BOTH are on the outside, the whole Family are LOST, and it is GOD who weeps/ grieves and mourns, seeking the lost, inviting us into the place of Joy.

Years ago, there was a true story from the life of Julio Diaz a Social Worker in NY, told on NPR's "Morning Edition". Every evening, after an hour long subway ride home to the Bronx, Julio was get off one stop early to eat dinner at his favorite diner. But one evening, when the Subway Platform was empty, he was walking toward the stairs when a teen-aged boy demanded all his money or his life. So Julio gave him his wallet. As the boy walked away, Julio called out "Wait a minute! You forgot something. If you are going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep warm." The assailant asked what he was doing? Julio said "If you are willing to risk your life and your freedom for a few dollars, I guess you really need the money. My only reason for getting off here was to have dinner. Hey, if you want to join me you are more than welcome." On the broadcast Julio described the boy just looked lost and in need of help. Remarkably the boy agreed.

Sitting in a booth in the Diner, the Owner, each of the Waiters, the Cook and the Dishwasher all came out of their way to greet Julio. The boy was like, "Everybody knows you here, are you famous?" Julio said "No, I just eat here a lot." The boy replied, "But you are even nice to the dishwasher and busboys." "Were you not taught to be nice to everybody?" "Yeah, but I never saw anybody live that way!"

When the bill arrived, Julio said "Look, I guess you will have to pay for dinner, because you have all my money. But if you give me back my wallet, I'll gladly treat you." The kid did not even think twice, but handed over the wallet. Julio gave the kid \$20 thinking he could use the money, but in return Julio asked for the knife.