

Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life – Grace as God’s Gift to Us

10/29/2023

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-9; Luke 15:11-32

Isaiah Talks About Jesus

The prophet Isaiah, who we heard from earlier today, wrote about the coming of Jesus roughly 700 years before Christ’s birth in Bethlehem. It always surprises me, how when you read and study the entire Bible, even in Old Testament passages, Jesus shows up. There are road signs pointing to Him on nearly every page of Scripture, if you’re looking for Him. Last week we launched a sermon series on Bishop Ken Carter’s book, *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*. Showing and receiving grace really is a way of living. Part of our problem, as Christians in a politicized society, is that we’ve forgotten who we are, and Whose we are.

We are called by God through Jesus Christ, and He demands that we pick up our cross, and follow Him. That means we stop living and carrying on the way we used to before we met Him, and we become imitators and image-bearers of Jesus, who, “though He was fully God, didn’t think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; took up the humble position of a slave, and was born as a human being, humbling Himself in obedience to God, and died a criminal’s death on the cross,” (Phil. 2:6-8, NLT). Christ dying on the cross most fully shows us God’s grace. That’s what orthodox faith is rooted in – the grace of God. His grace is for all of us. In his book, Bishop Carter talks about the baptism of an infant by a mentor he had. At the closing of the baptism, the friend prayed, “When this child reaches the moment of claiming the faith for her own, let it be that for her it is like taking a very small step over a narrow stream.”¹ Looking through the lens of grace, let’s turn to our Gospel lesson today. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal son. I’m reading from the NIV Bible this morning. **Read Luke 15:11-32**

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, talked a lot about grace. He identified three types of grace which God pours out on humanity – some of you who’ve been on Emmaus Walks have heard these before – prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is God’s presence in all people, prior to their acceptance of faith or response to His revelation to them. Justifying grace is the gift of salvation, which is a gift given to us by God through faith, and apart from anything we might try to do to earn it. Sanctifying grace is the journey toward holiness – our life-long response to the gift of grace which God has given.

Give Me What’s Mine

The way we live then, is our response to God’s gift in ourselves and others. As His image-bearers we must live connected lives, seeking for what Wesley called “social

¹ Kenneth Carter, *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023) pages 12-13.

holiness,” just as Christ is holy. Our understanding of holiness then, is that we need each other to be holy. I’m not holy on my own, and you can’t be holy on your own – we need each other, in connection, to be holy together. Over and over we see Jesus in Scripture, in relationships, valuing people, loving the unlovable. That’s what holiness boils down to – loving God and loving neighbors. God’s grace is welcoming, and requires us to recognize our own flaws and be humble in our treatment of others.

We see this play out in the parable this morning. The younger son tells his dad, “I can’t wait for you to die – just give me what’s mine, now.” That’s what the younger son’s statement boils down to in verse 12. And so, I’m sure with a broken heart, the father divides his property between the two sons. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living,” (verse 13), we’re told next.

I want to pause there, and say this – how do you think the father felt while the prodigal son was far away, squandering the family money? Probably sad, right? He probably thought about him a lot, and missed him. How about the older brother? Do you think he missed his younger brother while he was off living the high life? Has the United Methodist Church ever been like any of the characters in the parable? Yesterday West Ohio convened a specially called Annual Conference to finalize the disaffiliations of the last set of churches wanting to leave our connectional church. I wonder if they’ve ever read the story of the prodigal son and tried to envision themselves as characters in the story.

Wanting To Eat the Pigs’ Pods

For those churches which have left, we pray for them to succeed at the mission of making Jesus known, and reaching people for Him. I’d like to think that those which have departed would also pray for the continued success in making disciples of Jesus Christ for those who remain. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs,” (verses 14-15). Let’s be clear on something here. The first hearers of this parable of Jesus were Jews. If you know your Old Testament books of Numbers and Leviticus, you know hogs were unclean animals. No good Jew spent any time around them whatsoever. Kiss bacon, ham, and sausage good-bye! I’m glad I’m not Jewish! We have the curious situation where a prodigal son, presumably a Jewish young man, is now tending swine. Feeding them, perhaps bathing them, getting them ready for market.

“He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything,” (verse 16), we’re told. Can you imagine that? This fellow has hit rock-bottom. He’s lost all his inheritance on fancy clothes, fast cars, and women – and now instead of being on the front page of Forbes’ magazine, he’s in the field, literally starving to death, while tending pigs and feeding them bean pods. What a picture!

Look what happens next. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants,’” (verses 17-19). And so, the prodigal son takes the first step on the long journey home. He sets out to go home, to tell his dad that he’d made a mistake, and that he was willing to be a field hand on the family farm. Did you catch that? He says, “Make me like one of your hired servants,” not, “Well, I’m back!”

A Heartfelt Apology

It takes a special kind of humility – I’m convinced it comes from the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit gradually shaping us into better image-bearers of the Holy One – to go to someone who you know you’ve wronged, and apologize. And without any excuses. I want to point this out here today. The prodigal son doesn’t say he’s going to go back and try to justify to his dad why he had to leave. He doesn’t come up with some absurd story about how his older brother had wronged him for years and he decided to “get out while the getting was good.” He shows great humility. He plans to give – and eventually does give – a sincere, heartfelt apology. “Make me like one of your hired servants,” or as we might say today, “I just need a job.”

“So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him,” (verse 20). See, the father’s been watching and waiting for the prodigal son. He’s missed him, and he’s happy to see him. The father’s happy that his wayward son has come back home. In fact, he’s so happy, that he cuts off the whole spiel the wayward son had practiced on the long journey home.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,’” (verse 21). That’s all the prodigal son manages to get out of his mouth, and then the happy father interjects. “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate,’” (verses 22-23).

The Prodigal’s Homecoming Festival

And so, the celebrating begins! The ecstatic father even makes the statement, “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (verse 24). Like me, some of you have prodigals in your family. If they returned, with humility, the way this prodigal son did, we’d welcome them back. The same is true of our church family here. If we stay true to our mission, “of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and to bring hope, grace, and salvation to God’s people,” we’re going to encounter different people coming through our doors. We’re going to

see people coming in who maybe don't quite fit our mold. They may be a different skin tone than us. Some may even show up with a tattoo here or there.

I think we'd be surprised, church, if we knew who all in here had tattoos, and where they were located! As a North Star congregation, you've committed to being a welcoming, safe place for travelers – maybe even prodigals – far from home. Historically we've dehumanized people who aren't like us. Take for instance, LGBTQ. We turn it into an "issue," instead of recognizing that these are real people – which Christ adored to the point of dying for on the cross, really struggling to live life on the journey to holiness.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come, he replied,’ and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.’ (verses 25-29). We hear the discord in the family because of the return of the prodigal. See, the older brother got quite comfortable with not having his younger brother around anymore. There’s a sense of resentment we can pick up on – the father wouldn’t even give him a goat to cook for a meal with his friends. Yet here comes this rascal of a younger brother, and Pops has killed the fattened calf and thrown the party of the season for all the neighbors.

Envious Older Brother

See, the older brother doesn't view his younger sibling as worthy of receiving anything. He goes on, and even says, “But when this son of yours who has,” now hear this, exactly as the older brother says, “squandered your property with prostitutes,” wow! “comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” (verse 30). He's really resentful, isn't he? It's sad, really, because all that bitterness in his heart is toxic. Not only is his relationship with his younger brother dead, but now the relationship with the father is also being diminished because of it.

Notice how the father reacts. “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found,’” (verses 31-32). The older son gives his view of how his brother is. We'd call that an opinion. And the father comes back with a fact – that everything that's left already belongs to the older brother. He already split the estate between them, so what the older son sees, is what he gets – and it's all of it. In the heat of the moment, the older son must have forgotten that.

The Most Ancient Creed: Jesus Is Lord!

The disagreement coming to a close in the United Methodist Church boils down to a difference of opinion on the worthiness of people to be able to receive God's grace. Some folks emphasize personal holiness. They might say we have to have personal purity or piety if we want to get to Heaven. Others view holiness more along the lines of social justice – the reign of God with all its public and structural implications. They might tell us we have to transform communities and break the chains of bondage – whatever those may be – if we hope to be welcomed into Heaven.

God's grace, though, is abundant, and it's not an "either-or" situation so much as it's a "both-and." The grace we've received, we must extend to others, which is sustained by what Wesley called "the means of grace" – the ordinary channels by which Jesus is present to us. As we pray, as we read the Bible, as we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There are other things we do, which also help us feel the presence of God: singing hymns, sharing our faith stories, being with the poor, sick, imprisoned, being involved with a small group for accountability, attending worship services regularly.

There's nothing holy about our opinions – we see that with how the older brother angrily treats his father and spoils the happy mood of the homecoming festival of the wayward son. Our faith, and the theology of the United Methodist Church, is rooted in the soil of this doctrine and in the most basic, ancient creed: "Jesus is Lord!" And so, we will move forward, remaining true to our origins, "shaped by a religion of the heart, a love for God who first loved us, expressed in personal piety, and a deep motivation to see all people as worthy of the life that the Creator desires for us. A life of salvation and healing, learning and freedom, human dignity, flourishing, and hope. As we embrace this, God will use us to make a difference!"²

Prayer: Almighty God, to You all hearts are opened, all desires known, and from You no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Carter, *Unrelenting Grace*, pages 19-21 (paraphrased).