

“This Is Us: Who Are You?”
Luke 15:11-32

Our Bible story for today is a familiar one. It is one of the parables told by Jesus about two sons and a father. I would like to begin the story from the end with the banquet part. I want to invite you to imagine with me that we are at a feast of great celebration. We have been invited as guests to this extravagant party. There is great festivities and a lot of laughter. People are sharing food and drinks, telling stories about their lives and the joy of family and friends, and the food seemed to keep coming and the drinks kept flowing. You knew that the host of the party had a great joy and that was why he was being so generous. He ordered that the fatted calf, his best beef, to be butchered and cooked especially for this celebration. He even hired musicians to help with the celebration. And the amazing thing is that this party was not planned way in advance. We only found out about it the day before! This big banquet was put together very quickly, which meant that the host must have spared no expense in putting it together. People in the town were talking about this special event. Not only did the father take his wayward son back in, but he also threw him a huge party. Who does such a thing? They were not complaining that they got to enjoy such an amazing banquet, but they definitely were gossiping about the foolishness of this father. After all, everyone had heard about how his young son wasted his fortune on all kinds of bad things and how he broke all kinds of social and religious rules. He brought shame to his family and tarnished their reputation. He deserved none of this celebration. Nothing about the reason for the party seemed to make sense to any objective observer. It was no surprise to us to hear the commotion when the older son came home to find out about this big party for his brother. He was upset because it was not fair to have such a celebration for someone like his little brother who has dishonored the family for many years. The older brother was upset and did not hide it. He even had some words with his father, but who wouldn't? None of it made sense. None of it seemed appropriate!!! Fatted calf barbeque, musicians, dancing, invitation to the whole town, a great welcome home party, you would have thought that this guy was coming back from war after serving his country!!! This was wasteful love at its best!!!

Let's transition back to our time and consider the table of our Lord Jesus Christ and the feast that is set before us for today. Isn't this table about the same kind of seemingly foolish grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Isn't this exactly his vision for the kingdom of God? It does not make sense to us because if it really did, we would not struggle with it so much. If it made sense to our calculating and judgmental minds, we would seek reconciliation more often than we seek revenge. If it was rational, grace would not be so surprising to us that it turns our worlds upside down!

This reminds me of a scene from the first episode in the show “This is Us” where Randall, the third son of the Pearson family, meets his birth father. The storyline of the show is about a couple, Jack and Rebecca Pearson, who end up adopting Randall at birth because their third son, who was part of the triplet, dies at birth. When their adopted son Randall grows up to be a man, he finds a deep desire in his heart to get to know his birth father, even though he abandoned him as a newborn at a fire station.

Even though Randall seemed to have the perfect life, something in him was not complete. In fact, he spent his whole life being perfect in order to heal that broken part of himself, but that did not completely heal him. He needed to experience that deep sense of grace and reconciliation before he could begin to fully heal. I love the two scenes of his first encounters with his birth father. Let's watch the clip (only until 1:13):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8zbuJF7ktM>

Randall goes in with an agenda of anger and revenge, but then grace washes over him. It seemed foolish and he could not understand his actions. His actions just did not add up! He could not explain his reaction toward his birth father. He thought that by confronting him and yelling at him for what he did to him, things would be resolved. Instead, he found himself inviting him into his life. His story is so much like the story told by Jesus about the Prodigal Son.

Today, we are invited to look at our lives and our rational plans and calculations of life to let some radical grace in. We are challenged to loosen our grip on hate, fear, and anger to let God's grace define who we are. We cannot fully know or embrace who we are apart from that grace. Consider your life, your accomplishments, your failures, your thoughts about who you are and what makes you unique. Consider your identity and who you tend to think you are and how that view might be turned upside down by God's grace. If you are a person who tends to think very highly of yourself without seeing your faults, how might grace enter in to challenge that view? If you are a person who tends to see yourself as worthless and bad, how might grace enter and transform that view? In his autobiography, Presbyterian writer and pastor Fredrick Buechner wrote about his father's tragic death because he lost his sense of being a beloved child of God. One Saturday morning as the sun was rising, Frederick and his brother, Jamie, woke up excited. Their parents had promised to take them to watch football. Since the rest of the family was still sleeping, the brothers decided to stay in their room and muse themselves with an old roulette wheel. While they played together, they noticed their father quietly open the bedroom door and look in. After a while, he disappeared and closed the door behind him. Some time later, there was a piercing scream from downstairs. Looking out of their window, the boys saw their father lying outstretched on the gravel driveway. Blue smoke drifted from the open garage door into the crisp fall day. Their father had gassed himself. Buechner writes: "It was not for several days that a notice was found. It was written in pencil on the past page of *Gone with the Wind*, which had been published that year, 1936, and was it was addressed to my mother. "I adore and love you," it said, and *am no good*...Give Freddy my watch. Give Jamie my pearl pin. I give you all my love." What a tragedy for any human being to believe such illusions about their lives! I often long to see to people experience their deep soulful presence in God's grace which transcends our human logic.

The answer to our human struggles is to find our true selves in God which lies in our ongoing relationship with God. God blesses us with grace each day to continue to grow and mature in the fullness of who God created us to be.

Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton once wrote (screen), “The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. But whatever is in God is really identical with [God], for [God’s] infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in [God]. Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with God in whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence. Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find [God] I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find [God]. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 35-36.)

We are going to take a few moments to try to get in touch with our inner being, our true identity. Screen: In groups of three or four introduce yourself without referring to your family status, work, position, or any of your affiliations or accomplishments. Let’s share how that felt and why. Where do you tend to find your sense of identity? What helps you remember that you are a child of God? How often do you visit that place of grace in your daily life?

Let’s affirm our belonging to God: (Turn to your to your neighbor and say their name and tell them the first sentence) Name (insert your neighbor’s name), you are God’s beloved child.

We will close with these words from scripture as affirmations for each of us:

Leader 1: You did not choose me, but I chose you. Leader 2: You are my friend. Leader 1: I formed your inward parts and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. Leader 2: You are fearfully and wonderfully made, made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honor. Leader 1: You have been created in Christ Jesus for good works which I have already prepared to be your way of life. Leader 2: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Leader 1: You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Leader 2: I know all your longings; your sighing is not hidden from me. Leader 1: Nothing will be able to separate you from my love in Christ Jesus, your Lord. Leader 2: Abide in my love. Amen.