

“Godspell: The Parable of the Prodigal Son”  
Luke 15:11-32

I want to begin today with a clip from the Movie “1917.” The story is about two British soldiers during World War I who receive a seemingly impossible mission to deliver a message to an isolated regiment to stop them from walking into a German trap. The two soldiers had to cross enemy territory and overcome huge obstacles to fulfill their mission. The scene we are about to watch is when one of the young soldiers reaches the regiment but does not realize it. He sits there in despair as he listens to a song about the journey into eternal life, not realizing that he had made it! Here is the clip: <https://youtu.be/RVb4Tcgik-w>

That moment of numbness and lack of awareness of where he was is a very appropriate image to describe the people Jesus was dealing with. Jesus was faced with a challenge from people who had given up on several groups in their society because they considered them sinners and thus hopeless. Their lack of awareness of what was right in front of them was appalling. These religious leaders questioned Jesus' behavior of having relationships with the so-called sinners. Therefore, Jesus in kingdom of God fashion, turned the tables on those who were prejudiced in his day. In the beginning of the passage in Luke 15 we are told that Jesus was spending time with sinners and tax collectors which the religious leaders felt was a bad practice. They thought that if he was truly a faithful Jew, he would not agree to spend time with people who were considered outside of the acceptable social circle of the people of God.

Against the accusation of being someone who approves of public sinners and tax collectors, Jesus responds with a series of three stories about losing and finding, the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. These three parables are supposed to help the people get a different perspective on Jesus' ministry with the outcasts of society. These parables were designed to remind the listeners that God was in the business of finding and redeeming those who were lost. And in the process of redeeming what was lost, God seems to be a little foolish to those who knew the culture of the time. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to look for the one that is lost seems to take an unnecessary risk of losing the others for the sake of the one. The woman who looks very hard for her lost coin, when she finds it she goes and throws a party for her friends and in effect spends the coin for which she looked very hard. And of course in the parable for this week of the prodigal son, we know how unconditional the love of the father was for his son despite all of his problems. So in the three parables, Jesus was saying that to human beings, God's love may seem foolish, but that is the norm of the kingdom of God. Those who seem to be lost are not lost to God. Our social norms are not God's norms.

Jesus was clearly challenging the status quo about who was in and who was out in the social hierarchy of his day, reminding his people of the most essential lesson of faith that God's relationship with them was about learning to live gratefully for the gift of grace in life. This kind of outlook is essential for establishing just relationships and

communities. In the kingdom of God there is no room for feeling entitled to wealth, power and even love. Life is truly about learning how to receive and give love.

I think this parable is still as challenging today as it was in the time of Jesus because we continue to struggle with our self-awareness. If we were truly able to recognize that we all have blind spots, we would learn to be more open to others.

In her book *Insight*, psychologist Tasha Eurich tells about her discovery that when she studied people's self-awareness, she found out that only 15-20% of the general population are truly self-aware. The rest of us are truly not self-aware, even though 95% of us believe that we are. What is worse is that she discovered that the typical ways we do our self-reflection often lead us to less happiness and less awareness. We end up getting stuck in our past failures and hurts. We either go into the mode of self-righteousness and protection (These are the people who don't trust others or who always judge and criticize others) or we go into self-doubt and missing the beauty of who we are.

We see both modes of coping with life represented in the parable of Jesus for today: The lost son who acts as if he is worthless and wastes his life on things that don't satisfy and the other son who obeys all the rules and becomes bitter when his brother breaks the social norms of the time. And the only way for both brothers to find healing was to connect to the unconditional love of their father. Both needed the same thing. Grace is the only force strong enough to heal us.

I would like to explore with you three practical applications of this parable. The first one is to help us deal gracefully with each other, especially when we disagree. This comes from the work of philosopher Daniel Dennet on how to argue with kindness and care. We are going to practice this together. Dennet outlines a four-step process that is listed in your announcements:

1. Attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly and fairly that your target says: "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. List any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. Mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

This does not mean that you will agree with whatever is said to you. Instead, it offers you a tool to listen, to connect, and to understand.

The second one is to help us discover our own potential for goodness with clarity and grace by unmasking some of our false-self illusions (the ego stuff that gets in the way). This comes from the work of Tasha Eurich. She offers three strategies for understanding ourselves:

<https://youtu.be/uyQlx2p7Qe8>

1. Make the decision that you want to know the truth
2. Ask for feedback from someone who loves You and who is not afraid to tell you the truth
3. Ask “what” instead of “why”: Focus on what you want to see happen instead of getting stuck in blaming yourself or others for what happened.

The third piece is to go even deeper by committing to dwell daily in the unconditional love of God. Find a way to dwell in love and beauty each day. This could be being out in nature, centering yourself in prayer, in dance, in art, in gratitude, in reading, in breathing, in music, in movement, or in any way that connects you to the mystery of life. If you don't already do this, take a moment to ask God to help you be intentional about this.

I would like to share these words about grace by John O'Donohue in his book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace (screen)*, “Divine grace works without a program; it does not labor under the leaden intention of a pre-existent, fixed plan. Meister Eckhart states: ‘God has no why, but is the why of everything and to everything’... This is a subversive and liberating statement. It liberates God from entanglement in the mess of our needs, speculations and moralistic agenda... A God without a why is a God who is lyrical and full of grace, a God who has no other intention than simply ‘to be.’... God dwells totally in fluency of presence.”

We are going to end with reading only the words of the father in the parable. I invite you today to listen to the grace that God will communicate for you through them. I will read this three times: “Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!... Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Amen.