

A Giggle in Grace

Scripture Lessons: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I went to college a long time ago at the place that some still call “Jerusalem on the Brazos” – Baylor University in Waco. Well, Waco is no Jerusalem, but back then it had more than its share of religious radio stations. My friend and I would regularly drive out for lunch to a fast food grill named the “Health Camp” on LaSalle Avenue – still the best greasy burger I ever ate.

Since we were both minister students, we would listen to a famous Texas radio evangelist named Lester Roloff. He was obviously preaching from the station studio. The absence of coughing and snoring from the congregation only made him more intense. He needed an “amen” to spur him on, so he would “amen” himself (“*Amen!*”) We knew he was waving his arms, because he would bump the microphone and pound on whatever served as his pulpit. (“*Hallelujah!*”) Everyday – I mean *every* day – he would work himself into a revivalist frenzy that led to the same dreadful words. Now I hope that preaching like this has never been heard in this sanctuary, but let me give it a try: “All you no-good sinners out there – a-lyin’ and a-cheatin’ and a-stealin’ and a-cussin’ and a-smokin’ and a-drinkin’ and a-dancin’. You’re **all** goin’ to hell!! (*Praise God!*)” Sitting there in the car with our burgers in hand, we would break out in whoops of laughter!

But now I don’t laugh so much. You see, a lot of people were really listening ; they were taking his words seriously. Too many people have come under the spell of “no-good” preaching. Too many people feel like they are stuck in a mire of helpless shame and defeat. Too many people spend their days counting their sins and dreading how they will pay. Too many people think that every misfortune that comes in life is punishment for some “a-sinnin’” they have done. Too many people think that God had to kill his own Son for their no-good, sorry souls. Preaching like that never ends in laughter or joy.

The Pharisees ranted against the “no-goods” and judged the unclean, the outcasts - all of them sorry sinners. The Pharisees were proud to count themselves among the chosen few. The Pharisees thought religion was about better people judging the bad people. So they condemned other religions who were not chosen, and dismissed everyone who was not good enough to be admitted into the synagogue. The Pharisees had only grumbling for the teaching of the chosen One whom God named Savior and Messiah.

Jesus tells them a story about a father who had two sons: one who thought he was good like the Pharisees, and another who became the outsider because he rebelled and went away. The real theme in the illustration is not about the sons. It is about how the father loves both sons. God loves everyone, because that's who God is and what God does. At least, that's what Jesus was trying to tell everyone that day.

What does Jesus say to those who have been labeled outcasts and have heard all the wrong things about God from the self-righteous? He tells us about a very different father who loves all his children – no matter what they do or where they go. He tells of a God who sees way past our sins, who never forgets the divine dream born in us. He tells of a God who embraces who we are so that we can become who God can help us to be. He tells of a God who is waiting with hope for our return and runs to meet us in the road at the first sight of us, still in the dust and distance. There are a lot of lessons in what has been called “the parable of the prodigal son” – so many that you could read it each day through the season of Lent and write down a new thought that would change your life.

But this story should really be named “the parable of the loving father.” It does not matter whether we see ourselves in the prodigal son or in the elder brother who was always obedient. It's more important that we see God in the parable's father. I want you to imagine yourself as a child of this kind of father. It may be harder to do than you think. After all, both of these sons – different as they could be – had a hard time seeing the father for who he really was. Who do you see when you look at God?

There is the younger son, the famous prodigal, run away from home with his father's gifts to seek his fortune, or to find himself, or to claim his independence, or to prove he did not need anyone. There he is in his defeat and dejection and despair - out of money and out of inheritance, out of food and out of hope, eating with pigs and feeling worse.

In one of the forever phrases of scripture, we read that “he came to himself, ...came to himself.” Well, sort of. He does realize he is in the wrong place, and we can imagine he knows he has put himself there and feels awful about it. He is full of regret and guilt, full of what-ifs and wishes. But he still thinks he is far away, because he still thinks he is past forgiveness from his dad. His dream is reduced to a place as a slave, and it would be a step up.

Then there is the older son, the one who stayed close but never saw the place as home. He and his brother are more alike than we first think. What does Jesus say they have in common? “Here I work like a slave, and this son of yours...” The older son imagines himself a slave, too. There he is in his righteousness and resentment, his need for approval and hunger for appreciation, his fatalism that he can never do enough and his futility that good work just means more work. He cannot work hard enough to be good enough. He does not realize he is at home, and he feels awful about life on the farm. He is just as far away as his younger brother, because he has dreamed himself distant from his father.

Both sons “imaged” themselves as slaves, and they both thought they had been consigned to some kind of living hell. They could not really “come to their senses,” because they did not sense themselves the way the father always saw them. Jesus describes two sons, and all of us imagine ourselves some mixture of both of them. But can we really imagine ourselves the way that God images us?

I don't know how you think of God, or what kind of preaching you have heard, or whose ideas you have adopted, or what kinds of deep mental maps you have about life and God and who you are. But if you think you are going to hell, or you have fears that God is just waiting to judge you; if you think that some trouble in your life is God's punishment; if you feel you will never be good enough to be more than a slave: then I am begging you to read this story over and over again until you see the divine father who runs to meet you, the God who tells you that you have always belonged to God. God knows who you really are, and loves you in the mess you have made for yourself. When the Running God, all out of breath, grabs you up in the embrace of acceptance, ...then you have come to yourself. No matter the distance you feel from God, God is always close by and never ignores you. And God has never owned a slave.

Prodigal Augustine who became the Saint wrote: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in you." He found himself when he met the father of the parable. We cannot know ourselves until we see who God sees in us. God knows we are his, even when we don't. We are always God's, and everything God has is for us.

Do you hear your life in their words? "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your offspring..." "Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet and kill the calf for my son!" "I have worked like a slave for you..." "Son, all I have is yours! Come join the banquet!" We can't get the confession out of our mouths before God calls us son or daughter. We can't finish telling God the way we see ourselves before God tells us the way he sees us.

I was a boy in the age of the fall and spring revivals. Some famous preacher would visit as the evangelist, and preach a sermon he had practiced week after week from place to place. Robert G. Lee of Memphis, Tennessee, came to our town, to our church to preach his famous sermon "Pay Day Someday." To a seven year old, Lee was impressive in his white summer suit and his silver hair. He had a booming voice and dramatic gestures. (I can't remember if he ever bumped the microphone.) The sermon was long (45 minutes long), and the evening was late, but no one was snoring. He grumbled about sinners and ranted about God's judgment – "pay day someday."

We were sitting in our usual family place near the front, dad, mom and my little sister. Dianna, five years old, usually slept through night service, but not this night. "Brother Lee" was intense. He looked straight at us with his little round glasses and his pointed finger. And my little sister broke into a giggle! – one of those childlike giggles that can't be stopped. The preacher was staring down at us sorry sinners and telling us we were all goin' to hell - praise God. But a child who already could sing "Jesus loves me, this I know" saw the absurdity of it all.

The giggle you feel at the thought of such divine obliviousness to your sin and stupidity tells you how much God loves you. God's love is all you need, and God gives more love

than you can ever know. You are worth the coat and the ring and the deed to what ranch is left. The homecoming meal is more than leftovers or even a banquet. God throws a gala to tell everyone the good news that you are back. It's time for sons and daughters to be happy! The house is filled with holy merriment! Can you to feel the divine joy in this sanctuary? The Savior celebrates because you can finally see that who you have always been to God is who you will become. I hope you hear the out-loud divine laughter, and I hope you can always feel the giggle in your soul.