

Extravagantly Unfair Mercy

Sermon Preached Lent 4, 2022

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Pittsfield

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I remember preaching on this Gospel text in chapel at St. Paul's lower school. As I recall - I had printed images of piglets and posted them on a section of the pews. Those lucky enough to have to sit there were in the "pigpen." My goal was to catch their imaginations - it certainly made the kids giggle.

We may not be picturing ourselves hanging out in the pigpen, but we, too, are light-hearted hearing this familiar text on the heels of several weeks of difficult Lenten Gospels.

Except - the Gospel's good news is rarely comfortable, it's meant to be unsettling - as Jesus turns the world order upside down. This morning - he does so by welcoming us to a party.

For those of us who are good rule followers, this party is disconcerting - because, honestly, it isn't fair. We shouldn't be having a party to celebrate this selfish and awful younger son. But before we get too worked up, let's get our bearings.

At this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is being criticized for welcoming sinners. There are religious leaders who resent that Jesus liberally welcomes sinners and other rule-breakers. Jesus answers them, basically saying: "I came for the rule-breakers! I'm like a shepherd so concerned with one lost lamb that I leave the other ninety-nine to find it. I'm like a woman who sweeps the whole house looking for a single coin — and when I find it, I throw an expensive party! Wait, let me tell you another story..."¹ And he shares this parable.

He's addressing these critics, and all of us rule followers, who tend to act like the older son - refusing to celebrate his sibling's return. Jesus says, "Come, join the party. Why do you care if others come late, or are less than perfect? You're already here with me, and these are your brothers and sisters, so welcome them home! Rejoice with me!"²

But we're hurt and angry - it just isn't right. We're completely sympathetic with the older brother. Whose anger we can feel, as he stomps his feet in frustration: "It isn't fair!"

But mercy isn't "fair." Mercy moves beyond keeping accounts, it's loving the debtor despite the debts. That's why we call it "mercy." Like love and joy, mercy lives and moves in a sphere above and beyond "fairness."³

But for those of us bent on fairness, like the older son, that's difficult to take. Because the truth of it is, we're right. Our younger brother is a dishonest and disreputable con man. After shaming our father, and wasting all his inheritance, he comes home looking for a good meal and better treatment. He's not repentant, he's smart and manipulative.

And our father doesn't care. Father sees our younger brother while he is still far off, because he's been looking for him. And then Father runs toward him, embraces him and welcomes him home. Requiring nothing, no act of contrition, no repentance.... No, Father receives him with overflowing joy, and exuberant, unconditional acceptance. And it's definitely NOT FAIR.

But mercy isn't fair. And grace isn't earned. Unless people are gracefully welcomed home how will they ever change their lives? Jesus is gently but firmly assuring us that grace and mercy don't follow repentance - grace and mercy make repentance possible. Jesus says, "Beloved Ones, come in and celebrate! Let go of your painstaking accounting. Look, what's mine is yours, come in, come in, and rejoice in God's extravagant love!"⁴

This is a parable about the nature of God's merciful, graceful, compassionate love. God forgives us, and our neighbors, even before we repent.

God doesn't love us because we've picked up ourselves by our bootstraps in the swine fields, or even because we've repented. Rather, God loves us "even if." Even if we're con artists coming down a dusty road. Even if we're wayward lambs who've wandered into danger. Even if we've lost our way. God loves us in this "even if," unfair, extravagant way. Because God's love is full of mercy. That's why we call it "grace."⁵

The questions this parable puts before us sound soft and lovely, but are rather unsettling and difficult for those of us who rely on the scales of fairness to keep the world order.

What does it look like to rejoice in God's extravagant love? To welcome everyone to the celebration? How do we let go of our carefully balanced accounting? Let go of deciding who is in and who is out, who is worthy and who is not, who is US and who is THEM. So we might respond with God's extravagantly unfair mercy?

Friends, take a deep breath. God's mercy is wider than we can imagine. We can rest assured that God loves us even if. Even if we are a judge-y, tantrum throwing older brother. Even if we are an unrepentant younger son. Even if we're a real mess - God comes running to meet us and welcomes us home.

God offers us forgiveness even though we don't deserve it. God offers us pardon even though we haven't earned it. God offers us a home even though we were the ones who chose to leave it.⁶

Beloved siblings in Christ,

May we, from whom God has withheld judgment, withhold our judgment of others.

May we, whom God has chosen to forgive, forgive one another.

May we, whom God has chosen to love, love one another.

May we be merciful as God is merciful.⁷

That we might live into the abundant life God wills for all of God's children. Amen.

¹ Lost And Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4, saltproject.org, March 21, 2022.

² Lost And Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4, saltproject.org, March 21, 2022.

³ Lost And Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4, saltproject.org, March 21, 2022.

⁴ Lost And Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4, saltproject.org, March 21, 2022.

⁵ Lost And Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4, saltproject.org, March 21, 2022.

⁶ David Vryhof, SSJE , "Choices," Virtual Preaching Monks, Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022.

⁷ Adapted from: David Vryhof, SSJE , "Choices," Virtual Preaching Monks, Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022.