

An Invitation to Risk  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
March 27, 2022  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Friends, we sang these words at the beginning of worship: *For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind* (Frederick W. Faber, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*).

But, boy, do we struggle with that reality!

And this parable is one of the places that illustrates our struggle. Even as we appreciate this parable, even as we celebrate with a wayward Biblical character who finds his way home and is extended a lavish welcome, still when it comes to our own lives, we often struggle to find space for a love that broad or a grace that abundant. As Daniel G. Deffenbaugh writes, "The economy of such love and grace surprises, even offends, us in its extravagance" (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, 118).

Perhaps it is because we know the feelings of the younger son who says, "I no longer deserve to be called your son." Perhaps we have strayed from what seemed to be the better path. Perhaps we have traveled down a road lined with bad choices and worse choices. And perhaps we have come to a day when we wanted things to be different, but we didn't know how to affect change, and didn't feel we had the right to ask for help.

Perhaps it is because we know the feelings of the older son, the one who has spent a lifetime doing the right thing, making the right choice, even foregoing opportunities in order to be who others expect (or who we think others expect) us to be. Perhaps in our commitment to being right and doing right, to following the letter of the law, we have forgotten how to give and receive grace.

Well, friends. No matter where you find yourself, there is something in this parable for everyone. There is a gift for each of us...there is an invitation for each of us...and, ready or not, there is a challenge for each of us.

Jesus tells a story. A man had two sons. The younger one, craving adventure and wanting to know what was out there beyond the borders of his family's land, asked his father for his inheritance. And, while we often criticize the son for asking and then for taking off and losing all the money, what we must remember is that the father said, "Yes." We don't know why.

Perhaps he himself had always wanted the courage to try something different than what his family and culture expected. Perhaps he knew his younger son well enough to know that this longing wouldn't go away. Perhaps he knew that he could talk 'til he was blue in the face about the dangers, but that his son wouldn't understand until he had first hand experience. Perhaps the father was himself critiquing systems that kept identity

so tied to land and the family name. We simply don't know. But Jesus tells us that the father gave the son his inheritance and the son went off to see the world.

Of course we know that what he discovered is that there are many choices and it is easy to lose control. And, while the church has been very good at criticizing this younger son's behaviors - gasping at the sins he must have committed, the reality is that one doesn't need fast cars and risky gambles and intimate encounters as we often envision here, in order to lose touch or lose control. So, the younger son finds himself in a place of terrible destitution, longing for home.

Now, mind you, he isn't really expecting much. He knows he took a risk that in the eyes of his culture was deemed unforgivable by many. He is humble enough to go home, not expecting to sleep in his own comfortable bed or even to have a room waiting for him, but simply to become a servant, an employee of his family. After all, the lives of those who work for his father are so much better than where he has found himself.

And so, the younger son worked up the courage to return home, practicing his speech with every step, and inevitably feeling a rock in the pit of his stomach that got more noticeable as he got closer.

In fact, it may have been at the very moment when he was ready to turn away...too ashamed to even ask that his father take him in...perhaps as he was getting close to the end of the long driveway up to their home, but still out of sight and feeling like he could change his mind...perhaps it was at that moment that he was surprised by a flurry of activity kicking up dust as his father lifted the skirts of his robe and came running to greet him.

How this must have caught the younger son off guard. He was certain that at best he would be tolerated and that there was the possibility his father wouldn't even receive him, wouldn't even be willing to hear his request. But never in his wildest dreams did he envision a scenario where his father would see him before he knocked, before he even turned up the drive. Never did he dream his father would be looking for him even while he was still far off. Never in his wildest dreams did he envision a scenario where his father would run to him, would throw his arms around him, and would throw a party before even asking any questions.

And there was good reason for him not to expect this. After all, the fact that his father had given him inheritance in the first place, the evidence that his father had been longing for him this whole time, the running down the lane (something respectable men simply didn't do), the forgiveness without punishment, the gifts that reassured him that he was still fully part of the family, the party - a public celebration of his return and his life...little if any of this was usual or expected or even applauded by the norms of their day.

And yet, that is how the younger son was received.

Of course, still there is the older son. Perhaps modern day studies of birth order would tell us that he is a textbook case. Not that firstborns are always unforgiving and jealous of their younger siblings, but textbook in the sense that he knew the rules and followed them...that he didn't ask for anything in excess. If he had had the desire to step outside the expectations, he would have more likely dampened that desire down...if he had wanted a party for his friends, he would not have asked but instead would have waited for his father to offer.

And, friends, while it is easy for us to both relate to and be critical of the older brother, let us just acknowledge that it is not an easy role to fill. And so he struggled. As his brother went off to see the world, he struggled. As his father longed for his adventuring brother, he struggled. As his father welcomed his brother home with joy, he struggled. As his father threw a party for his brother, he struggled.

And that same father never lost sight of him either. Even as the party raged, as friends and neighbors came to celebrate the wholeness of this family, the father noticed the absence of the older brother and sought him out.

And he invited him into the same grace...a grace to be both given and received...a grace that allows for compassion and also for joy.

And the invitation is there for us as well. But sometimes we miss it. Sometimes we get so caught up in the characters of this parable. Sometimes we get so caught up in our assumption that this is a metaphor about God. Sometimes we lose ourselves in the details...and maybe it seems safer there.

But, let's back up. This is a parable in a series of parables that respond to a question about why Jesus hangs out with the people he does. And his answer comes in the form of an invitation.

As Leslie J. Hoppe says, "It is as if Jesus is asking the Pharisees and the scribes if they are going to join him in reaching out to their wayward brothers and sisters, if they are going to rejoice with him over God's most gracious mercy, or if they, like the elder brother, will refuse to enter the banquet room, preferring to be on the outside, thinking of nothing by their resentment over the reconciliation between God and sinners that Jesus came to effect" (Leslie J. Hoppe, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, 121).

That same invitation comes to us.

We have associated the word prodigal with the younger son for so long that many of us might only think it is a word about wasting fortunes. But it is also a word that is about giving on a lavish scale, with great generosity. In other words, this is the parable of the prodigal father and one that invites us to be prodigal in our attitudes and actions toward others. It invites us to give and receive grace and mercy and compassion in abundance.

But this comes with a warning. Because friends, grace is risky. Compassion is risky. In his book, [Daily Afflictions: The Agony of Being Connected to Everything in the Universe](#), Andrew Boyd noted, *"Compassion hurts. When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destinies of others. You must either learn to carry the Universe or be crushed by it. You must grow strong enough to love the world, yet empty enough to sit down at the same table with its worst horrors."*

Perhaps this is the invitation of today's parable...to be so prodigal, so lavish, so generous with our welcome, with our grace, with our compassion that we even risk ourselves for the care of another. Perhaps this is the invitation of our faith...to take the risk to love and to care and doing so, to become more like God. Amen.