

Luke 15:1-3,11b-32
The Father's endless love

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the common lines you hear from young children is "that's not fair". I'm pretty sure I used it at times when one of my four siblings got something, and I missed out. It happens when a new baby is born, and suddenly they get all the attention. For an older sibling, it's just not fair. If the baby makes a mess, it's cute, but if I make a mess, I get into trouble. It's not fair.

When we hear the familiar parable of the prodigal son, even though we know it well, it still strikes us because there is so much in it that's not fair. For starters, demanding your inheritance while your father is still alive doesn't seem very fair to him, and really is just plain rude. The younger son is basically saying to his father, "I wish you were dead". But the father actually does it. The sons, both of them, get their fair share of the inheritance. Now the older one would get more as that's just how it worked. If you were the younger son maybe you'd think that's not fair.

We know what happens next. The younger son heads off with his newfound wealth and starts to live the high life. If you were the older son at this point, still at home, still working on the family property, you would most certainly think, "that's not fair." But we need to consider why Jesus told this parable. This is the third of three parables that Jesus tells in response to the scribes and Pharisees grumbling because Jesus was mingling with sinners and tax collectors, and even eating with them. According to the Pharisees, it wasn't fair that Jesus would spend time with such lowly people. They certainly don't deserve it.

These parables are for us too when we think that some horrible sinner could never belong to God's family. Such thinking is grounded in the false belief that we deserve God's grace and they don't. Somehow, in some way, we are good enough to receive God's salvation, but those horrible people are not. The reality is much simpler. No one is good enough to receive God's salvation. Scripture says we were dead in our trespasses. Dead, and deserving of nothing.

But, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4-5, NRSV). This is grace. God's free gift of salvation to those who were dead through sin. The parable of the prodigal son shows the vastness of God's grace. And it also shows that by its very definition, grace is not fair. And that's good.

Grace being unfair is good for us. Getting what we fairly deserve would not be very enjoyable. Romans 6 says the wages of sin is death. The fair payment for your sin is your death. But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Sin promises freedom, but it only brings slavery; it promises success, but brings failure; it promises life, but only brings death. The younger son in the parable discovers this the hard way. He thought his inheritance meant freedom and success and a good life. Instead, he found slavery, failure, and almost certain death.

There was one way out for the prodigal son, returning to the father that he had abandoned. He rehearses his story, willing to return as a slave, not a son. You can almost get the impression that he's not actually repentant. Sure, he is in sorrow because of his predicament, but does he trust his father's love? Luther wrote that repentance consists of two parts, contrition and faith. Meaning when the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and draws us into the saving arms of Jesus, there is both a recognition that we have done the wrong thing and a trust that Jesus has paid the price for us. Contrition alone, sorrow alone, is not repentance. Admitting your guilt simply because you got caught is not the same as realising you are guilty. And in this parable, both sons are guilty, and it would seem that neither of them fully comprehended this.

Remember what happened at the start of the story when the younger son demanded his inheritance? The father "divided his property between them." Both sons received their share at that point. The younger one asked for it, but the older one willingly received it too. And both sons, in their own way, showed they cared more about material possessions than their family relationship. This is not good. We are always heading for trouble whenever we value things more than people, pleasure more than duty, and distant scenes more than the blessings we have right at home.

Both sons also, in their own way, misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the older cannot let go of what seems fair to him. Yet both are welcomed home, regardless. For both sons, the father comes out to them to invite them in. The father puts aside any notions of good order and proper ways of behaving. Twice he leaves the home to invite a son back in. One had gone far away, the other physically still there but in a way just as distant. One thinks he's no longer worthy to be a son and asks to become a servant, the other describes himself as slaving away and receiving nothing.

These two brothers are not as different as you might think, but the overwhelming message of the parable is in the actions of the father. This is where we see the odd behaviour, the unexpected thing that draws us in to how the kingdom of God operates. The father seems reckless in his actions. He gives the sons their inheritance well before that should have happened. When the younger son returns the father runs to greet him and brings him back into the fold before hearing much of a confession at all. Then he throws a big party to welcome home someone who has brought great shame upon the family. In welcoming the younger son in such a way, the father is being reckless with his own reputation, his own standing among the local population. But that doesn't seem to matter.

St Paul describes the Christian message of Christ crucified as being scandalous to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles. And we see exactly that in this parable. Only a fool would give his sons their inheritance while still alive. Only a fool would welcome a wayward son back home without any evidence of improved behaviour. But that's how God's kingdom works. That's what the cross of Christ is for us. It is scandalous and it is foolish, but it is our salvation. It is undeserved grace, it's not at all fair to us or to Jesus. We get his righteousness and his life. He gets our sin and our death.

It's not fair, but thank God that it's not. Thank God that he looks at sinners like us and pours out his abundant grace and mercy and gives us reason to rejoice. We were dead to sin and now have life, we were lost and now are found. So let us rejoice and give praise for our heavenly Father's unceasing love towards us, and his great invitation to come feast at his table for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.