

March 6, 2016
Rev. Scott Shreve

“Graceful Living”

First UMC, Waverly
Luke 15:11-24

Our gospel lesson is the abbreviated version of the story of the Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother. This morning I would like to focus on the Waiting Father and the impact his attitude and actions have on our lives. We read that while the repentant son “was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around his son and kissed him.”

In this parable Jesus is declaring, over against many Old Testament images that would indicate otherwise, that God is not judgmental and vindictive in nature or possessing a need to pronounce eternal damnation on wrong doers. Jesus is declaring that abundant and overflowing grace is the proper portrayal of God’s nature. God is grace and mercy.

For folk that live in the land of judgment, punishment and self-abasement this is good news. God is grace and mercy. For folks burdened with the weight of 613 rules and regulations that have been derived by from the Ten Commandments that will find fault with their each and every action this is great news! God is grace and mercy. God is not about finding our faults. God is about forgiveness us and giving each of us a new start again, and again, and again.

No other image has come closer to describing the character of God, in my humble opinion, than the waiting father. The father in this parable is peering down the road longing for the son’s return, then springing to his feet and running to meet him. In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run. Yet the father set aside all concern for propriety and ran. He was moved by compassion.

Let’s read verse 20 again, ...his father saw him and was filled with compassion....”

The father was moved by sympathy and his joy carried him down the road to embrace his wayward son. He embraces and kisses his returning son. That is good news for each of us that have done that which is wrong or disappointing in the eyes of God Almighty. God has compassion upon us.

The son immediately starts into his rehearsed speech. He calls out “Father” and voices his confession and contrition. But before the son can ask to be received back as a servant the father interrupts him, giving instruction to his servants. He calls for a robe – the first one, the best one, or possibly the one the son had worn originally. He calls for a ring for his son’s finger and calls for sandals for his feet.

If you were witnessing this event you would have thought that the son was returning from a monumental success...maybe returning from war where he battled in a valiant and honorable manner...maybe he excelled in the Olympic Games with gold medals hanging from his neck...maybe he graduated from college with honors with a post-graduate scholarship in hand...maybe returning with his wife and children as he is being transferred home for a great promotion in his career. If you were witnessing this event as the father embraces his son you would have thought that the son was returning from a monumental success of some sort or another that brought pride and joy to the father.

God does celebrate our successes. Yet that joy is only exceeded by the divine joy of welcoming the wayward child home. That is good news for each of us that have done that which is wrong or disappointing in the eyes of God Almighty. God has compassion upon us. God is not about finding our faults. God is about forgiveness us and giving each of us a new start again, and again, and again.

The father publicly receives the son back into his house. It is a sign to the rest of the village that the boy is to be treated as a son again. He is a forgiven, a freed man, an honored guest, a son. The lavishness of the father’s reception is signaled by the order to bring the fatted calf and kill it. Meat was not part of the daily diet in

Palestine in biblical days. Meat was normally reserved for special festivals. The son's return is an occasion for celebration.

When I started this sermon it was my intent to talk about God grace and then focus on how we, as children of God, need to reflect God's grace in our lives and give some examples of doing so. Yet, upon further reflection I thought that the expanded message about our attitude of grace is for another day.

This morning, let's just let this message sink in. Jesus tells us in this parable that the nature of God is sheer and all-encompassing grace.

What is God's attitude towards you and me when we are sinful, self-righteous, ugly, wrong and wayward? God is waiting, peering down the road, and anticipating our return. In verse 17 we read, "But when he came to himself he said...why I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father..."

When we have done wrong God is just waiting for us to "come to ourselves" and return. God, filled with compassion, is waiting, peering down the road, and anticipating our return.

Historically religion in union with the many structures humanity has created cries out judgment and punishment upon each and every one of our many inadequacies. Jesus cries out "No more!"

Jesus declares with this parable and with the totality of his life that God is not judgmental and vindictive or possessing a need to pronounce eternal damnation on wrong doers.

Jesus declares abundant and overflowing grace is the proper portrayal of God's nature. God is grace and mercy. It is that love and forgiveness that we celebrate as we join in sharing of the bread and the juice in Holy Communion.

Please turn to page 15 at front of the United Methodist Hymnal as we prepare our hearts to share in the Lord's Supper this morning. Amen.