

Offensive Grace
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."
So he told them this parable:*

...

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with

me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The story of the prodigal son is a classic. Like the writings of William Shakespeare or the stories of Walt Disney, we intrinsically know the story of the prodigal son. It's the cautionary tale we are told as a child. It's the example of forgiveness we draw on as an adults. It's the pat on the back we give ourselves, reassured that things could be worse. It's a classic because its relatable. Be it early Palestine or modern-day Oregon, we know that family dynamics are complicated and living in community is messy. But don't be lulled into comfort as we wade through this familiar parable because this story is offensive.

The instigator of this whole parable—the younger son—has the audacity to ask his dad for his inheritance. While in 2022 it's common place for some parents to help finance college or to assist their children in coming up with a down payment for their first house, the request in this parable is altogether different. By asking for his inheritance, it is the equivalent of telling his father “My life would be better off if you were dead!”. As the younger brother, he is not actually entitled to any inheritance; that goes to his older brother. So again, he is telling his brother “I wish you were dead!”. And then the younger brother takes the portion of inheritance given to him and wastes it by living in such a way that is ill becoming of the customs and culture he was raised in; a slap in the face to the religious practice and faith that he claims. We don't have to search very far to find the villain of our story. Nothing the younger brother does is mild, it is all overtly offensive. His motto in life: SIN BOLDLY!

But what about the other people in our story? We are introduced to the older brother. I would venture to guess that many of us—myself included—can see ourselves reflected in the older brother. He is a rule follower. He does what is asked of him, doesn't stray far from the straight and narrow, and lives up to his family's expectations. While it is easy to point out his lack of compassion and the temper tantrum he throws in want of his own party, its far less easy to point out his offensiveness. Any transgression we can squeeze out is forgettable and easily swept under the rug. But lest our quickness to overlook the older brother mark him as above reproach, his faults are just as offensive. We must remember that sin is anything that separates us from God. So, while the sins of the elder brother are more culturally acceptable, Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes—the president of Princeton Theological Seminary—dubs the older brother as the “boring sinner”. I would venture to conclude that the boring sinner is just as problematic—if not more so—as the bold sinner because their sins lurk in the shadows. They come camouflaged as justifiable actions; nonetheless offensive.

And then we come to the father. In Jesus' telling of this parable, we are drawn to the father as exemplary, his actions stand out as radical as they redefine acceptance, forgiveness, and love. But the original hearers of the parable would have seen the father as just as offensive as his sons. The way he

gave into his son's request for his inheritance. Offensive. The way he ran to greet his returning son. Offensive. The party he threw welcoming his son back into the community. Offensive. The embarrassment of the father's actions were as if they left a stain on the whole community. So. Very. Offensive.

So why are we hearing this offensive story? Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal and his family as the third of three stories about things that were lost. The first story tells of a shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep in search of the one that was lost. Contradictory to intuition, the shepherd finds value in rescuing the lost sheep instead of cutting his losses and continuing on with the remaining 99. Each sheep is valued and important. The second story tells of a woman who has lost a coin and frantically searches for it despite having 9 remaining coins. Not willing to chalk it up as gone forever, the woman is only content when all have been found and accounted for. And then we have the story of the reckless son who was lost to the ways of the world and who comes back. We are told the father runs out to greet him, before he even makes it back to the house, alluding to the father keeping watch for the son. The father is not content with just the one remaining son, he wants his whole family back together.

Jesus tells these stories in response to pharisees—religious leaders—pressing him, shaming him, for eating meals with those in the community who are considered lost. He shares meals with the sinners, the rejects, the ones who have been deemed beyond salvageable. Jesus tells these stories of the lost to remind us that there is nothing and no one that is beyond the pale. Everyone is worth the extra effort. Rules and customs be damned, these sinners who society has already judged as unworthy are just as worthy as those who have cast them out.

We hear these stories in the midst of Lent, a holy season of searching. We search ourselves, rooting out the offensive which has taken hold in us. Walking with Jesus through his final days leading up to his crucifixion, a wholly offensive act. And in Lent we witness a death that was meant for us. But here's the thing about Lent, a season permeating with the offensiveness of sin, it is overcome by something much more offensive: Grace. We imagine grace as a thing with wings, a butterfly in the sunshine surrounded by rainbows. And it is that, but grace is also gritty. It wades through the gross and finds the things lurking in hidden crevasses. It gives flight to the things we cannot put into words. It diminishes the doom which weighs us down in hopelessness. It leads the lost and hopeless to the foot of the cross and says this was done for you. You are made new.

The Old Testament is filled with one offensive thing after another. Adam and Eve eat from the one tree they are told to stay away from. A people so off course God sends a flood. Exiles lamenting that slavery would be better than the freedom given by God. Every turn laced with disappointment as covenants God makes with God's people are shattered over and over again. Like the younger brother in our parable, every turn greeted with a poor choice. And so, God makes the ultimate covenant. God sent redemption in the divine person of Jesus. Knowing that labor pains would turn into the pain of

death. An act which leads to grace. Grace that is so pervasive it doesn't care who it offends. Because grace is here for those of us who are the boring sinners but also for those of us who are the bold sinners. There is nothing too lost to outrun the grace of God. This is offensive grace. The grace that could care less about the ways of polite society. This is the grace that runs to greet us when we are still far off, celebrating us, lavishly heaping love on us. This is the grace that doesn't care what the religious elite have deemed worthy or not, it goes where no one dares to go. This grace is full to the brim. So put one foot in front of the next as we continue this journey through Lent anticipating overwhelming offensiveness in the form of grace.