

“Found by Grace”
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

One of my favorite lines from the 1994 movie “Forrest Gump” is when Lieutenant Daniel Taylor asks Forrest: “Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?” And the answer from Forrest was: “I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.” This answer from a supposedly simple person speaks volumes about faith and life. It turns our expectations upside down. Normally, we tend to think of ourselves as the ones seeking God as if God is distant and far away from us. Forrest Gump turns the tables on Lieutenant Taylor.

This is what Jesus was doing in a way to those who were questioning his behavior. He turned the tables on them. In the beginning of the passage in Luke 15 we are told that that Jesus was spending time with sinners and tax collectors which the religious leaders of his day felt was a bad practice. They thought that if he was truly a faithful Jew, he would not agree to spend time with people who were considered outside of the acceptable social circle of the people of God. Sinners in those days were people whose occupation or vocation, by its very nature, would cause them to break the Mosaic Law (Law of Moses) or to work outside the Law. So, for example, anyone who raised pigs or worked on the Sabbath or was a prostitute would have been a “sinner.” Some examples of sinners were: those who sold their inheritance (that was against the teachings of God because the land was a gift from God to be kept in the same family), pig keepers, shepherds, those who raised pigeons, those who left the covenant, and Samaritans. So sinners were not just people who just committed a personal sin. They were those who were socially rejected because of some public definition of acceptable professions. This was also true of tax collectors. They were rejected by society because they were seen as occupation collaborators. They collected the taxes owed to the Roman and Jewish governments. They were legally allowed to take a portion of the taxes for themselves.

Against the accusation of being someone who approves of public sinners and tax collectors, Jesus responds with a series of three stories about losing and finding, the lost sheep, the lost coin and today's reading about the lost son. These three parables are supposed to help the people get a different perspective on Jesus' ministry with the outcasts of society. These parables were designed to remind the listeners that God was in the business of finding and redeeming those who were lost. In addition to the obvious connections we normally make with the father seeking his son who was lost and then found, this parable is strongly connected to the story of Jacob in the Old Testament. This connection is strongly made by Kenneth Bailey in his book, *Jacob and the Prodigal*, showing that this parable is about exile and redemption, being lost and then being found by God's grace. Any of you remember the story of Jacob? It is the story of the son of Isaac (the son of Abraham) who cheats his brother out of the father's blessing and then he has to flee his country in order to avoid being killed by his brother Esau. Through a careful study of the story Bailey shows us that the story of the prodigal son or the lost son is a story about God's grace and love for the whole world, the redemption of Israel and the rebirth of Israel as people who know the grace of God in their dealings. It is about their exile and redemption. They have been exiled from grace by living as if greed and control were the only ways to happiness. But through God's grace, all will be redeemed, those who are clearly lost such as Jacob and the prodigal son and those who don't even know that they are lost, such as Esau and the older brother in the story. The jealous reaction of the older brother is a reflection of the reaction of the religious leaders to those who are labeled as sinners in society. But even those who are self-righteous and think highly of themselves are offered God's grace. It is very interesting that Jesus would use a reference to one of their national heroes, Jacob, to show

them how God's grace works. Jacob who was once lost became the cornerstone of their ancestry of faith.

Jesus was clearly challenging the status quo about who was in and who was out in the social hierarchy of his day reminding his people of the most essential lesson of faith that God's relationship with them was about learning to live gratefully for the gift of grace in life and love. This kind of outlook is essential for establishing just relationships and communities. In the kingdom of God there is no room for feeling entitled to wealth, power and even love. It is about learning how to receive and give love.

What if we lived with this kind of attitude about life? Our focus would be on the redemption which God presents to all. With this perspective our whole attitude about life and community would change. Our attachment to control and power would have to be dissolved in the greater vision of grace and love. Our need to label or exclude others would be gone. Of course this kind of awareness takes a lifetime of disciplined openness to God's love.

In her book, *Praying Your Goodbyes*, Joyce Rupp talks about this kind of awareness which comes to us through dealing with loss in our lives. Rupp begins this book recalling how she felt when her brother died. It was her first time to experience deep loss. Then she talks about other losses in her life, and losses in the lives of people she has known and counseled. Her conclusion is that life is a pilgrimage in which we are constantly losing loved ones and possessions, and at the same time, encountering new people and acquiring new possessions. Through loss in our lives, we can learn that people and things don't belong to us. They are not ours to keep. We are only on pilgrimage. We aren't permitted to own or hold on to anything forever. We only enjoy it—and celebrate it—and let it go. What if we lived life as if we are pilgrims and not owners? Think about our economy and how we attempt to fix problems. Do our ways reflect a sense of living as pilgrims or as owners? Do we seek happiness in possessions, manipulation and power or do we see life as an opportunity to love and be loved? Do we allow the grace of God to find and redeem us or are we too busy seeking that which does not satisfy?

Both the prodigal son and his older brother needed to learn how to be found by grace. The younger brother needed to learn that his happiness did not come from wealth or manipulating his father. The older brother needed to learn how to celebrate grace and redemption even if some rules were broken in the process. The people in Jesus' time needed to learn that the kingdom of God was not a religious social club for the upright citizens of the world. The kingdom of God is about being found by God's grace which can turn our world upside down, our mourning into rejoicing, our fears into hope, and our death into new life.

This story of love is the wisdom we need in our world and in our lives. Spending so much of our energy on finding happiness or protecting our views and our power often leads us to be either the manipulating little brother or the rigid and controlling older brother. Learning to live with this vision of Jesus in the kingdom of God is about our ability to let go of our desire for control, for affection, for security and for changing things to fit our agendas. At the heart of this letting go is our ability to be found by God's grace. In her book, *Behold Your Life*, Macrina Wiederkehr notes that, "In order to experience healing it is imperative that we find the courage to look upon our wounds and integrate them into our lives. Sometimes we suffer from the decision to remain a victim. We can wallow in self pity and choose to live embittered lives because of wrongs done to us. ...but there is another way. In this other way we compassionately befriend our wounds. Thus, we learn experientially that what we wallow in will make us sick; what we embrace will restore us to health."

The story is told about a grocer who went to a spiritual teacher in great distress to say that across the way from his shop they had opened a large chain store that would drive him out of business. His family had owned his shop for a century - and to lose it now would be his undoing, for there was nothing else he was skilled at. The teacher said, "If you fear the owner of the chain store, you will hate him. And hatred will be your undoing." "What shall I do?" said the distraught grocer. The teacher said, "Each morning walk out of your shop onto the sidewalk and bless your shop, wishing it prosperity. Then turn to face the chain store and bless it too." "What? Bless my competitor and destroyer?" "Any blessing you give him will rebound to your good. Any evil you wish him will destroy you." After six months the grocer returned to report that he had had to close down his shop as he had feared, but he was now in charge of the chain store and his affairs were in better shape than ever before.

Opening ourselves and our world to this radical wisdom of Christ to live by grace is an invitation to live life abundantly. May each one of us live knowing the gift of this amazing grace! Amen.