

WHICH COMES FIRST: GRACE OR REPENTANCE?

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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Perhaps no Scripture text has logged more pulpit time in our culture than the story we know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a storehouse of sin and redemption, of grace and the refusal of grace, and one can read it from several different perspectives – the father, the prodigal, the older brother. Over the years, preachers have tried all sorts of approaches to unpack its riches. I read once of one preacher who gave a sixteen-week sermon series on the Prodigal Son; after the final sermon a woman greeted the pastor at the door of the church, shaking her head, and said, “I’m so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home.”¹

Some think the story has become a bit *too* familiar for us. Tom Long once argued that the very familiarity of the parable hinders our understanding. This is a story that “presents a picture of divine acceptance so radical and sweeping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and provoked sputtering outrage.” But in many churches today, Long argued, we have heard the story so often that we miss its shock value.

“There was a man who had two sons,” [the story begins] and we know where this one is going. [Today] the story has all the bland predictability of a biblical theme park. The awful, relationship-shattering words, “Give me my share of the inheritance,” leave us unruffled because we can already hear the musicians tuning up for the joyful dance jig at the end. We are untroubled by the son’s anguished lament, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” because the aroma of the fatted calf roasting on the spit wafts over the narrative and covers up the fetid stench of the pigsty. Fear not, the boy is coming home. He always does....

But the [problem with] the prodigal son story is not just the result of over-familiarity [Long said]. Countless repetitions have transformed what was once a parable with trap doors and mysterious and unexpected depths into an Aesop’s fable, an anecdote with a prosaic moral tag... [which] coos a little cultural wisdom in our ears: “Hey, no matter how badly you have messed up life, pick yourself up. A ready supply of forgiveness is waiting, and you can start over where you left off.”²

The problem with such a take on the story, Long said, is that this surprising, even shocking story becomes instead “a predictable bit of self-help advice.” It assumes that once the young prodigal has pulled himself together and headed home, the father is then obliged to throw a party for him upon his return. The celebration is “his due” for his

¹ As told by Peter J. Gomes, “It’s About the Father: The Prodigal Son,” in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 2003, 236.

² Thomas G. Long, “Surprise Party,” *Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, 10.

turnaround.³ Read that way, what we get is a comforting and reassuring tale with absolute predictability. It's just not the shocking and surprising little parable that Jesus first told!

Long may be right, but I also know this story still packs the power to shock and offend, because it speaks of grace, and grace not only has the *power* to offend us today but *does* offend when it is exercised. What many people still want, I think – today as much as ever – is some assurance that their right behavior and right belief count for something. The notion of *unmerited* grace still bothers many of us a great deal.

Several years back I preached a sermon on this text, one that spoke of the embrace of sinners, whether the sin was profligate living or prideful self-righteousness. At the door several people noted their discomfort with the concept of free grace, preferring to think about grace as a response to merit. One man, clearly agitated, told me candidly that he was ready for me to stop preaching about grace and start preaching about repentance. After all, he said, repentance is always the precursor of grace.

I don't know exactly what prompted me to respond the way I did, but as I recall, I made an uncharacteristically categorical statement. "There is not a single instance in the Gospels," I said, rather assertively, wondering even in the moment if I were right, "when Jesus requires repentance before he extends grace or healing or hospitality. Not one! Repentance is a *response* to God's grace, not a prerequisite for it. Grace always comes first."

As soon as I took off my robe after the service, I went to my Bible. Since that day I have spent considerable time researching the matter, and though I won't be so categorical today, I still can't find an instance that works in the other direction. I still believe grace precedes repentance. Jesus' parable of the father with the two sons underscores that normal progress. On the surface, it may appear that repentance comes first in this parable. The younger son, tired of his pig-sty diet, comes to himself and begins rehearsing his confession of sin... and he receives grace and forgiveness and welcome when he returns to speak that confession. But the movement of the story makes it clear that the grace of the father is pre-emptive... and not just toward the younger son. The late Harvard preacher Peter Gomes was helpful, I think, on this point:

The prodigal is willful, foolish ... self-centered ... and indulgent. He comes home only when he has nowhere else to go. The [older] brother is petty, spiteful, jealous, self-righteous, and rather lacking in imagination. I think we should pity the poor *father*, who has to live with this conspicuous vice and the even more conspicuous virtue: perhaps *he* should have run away and left the place for the two of them to fight it out.

He didn't, though, because the story is about him, and we know he won't run away.... We know of his character, his nature, because of what his sons say and do. The prodigal tells us the character of his father when he says at his lowest point... "I will arise and go to my father." He didn't expect the fatted calf, but he

³ Long, "Surprise Party."

knew enough to know that his father, by his very nature, by his very character, would not, could not, disavow him... [and that] his father would be there to receive him. He knew... that his father's nature was love; and his knowledge was rewarded and returned....

So, too, did the older brother know this, and it is on the basis of the father's love and justice that he complains – for you complain only to someone in whose justice you have confidence. Both sons presume upon what they know to be there and what they know to be theirs: the unconditional love of the father for his own.

This is the heart of the gospel and of Jesus' message [says Gomes]: no one is too far gone, too low, too abased, too bad to be removed from the unconditional love of [God] ... and no one is too good, too dutiful, too full of rectitude, for that love. It is the nature of the Father to love those to whom he has given life.... [Some] will notice that the prodigal son acknowledges his sins, but it is not the confession that triggers the love but the father's love that triggers the confession.⁴

So, yes, repentance is important, and we see that in this parable Jesus tells, where both sons need to repent in order to enjoy life in their father's house. As Alan Culpepper says, repentance for the prodigal son means learning to say "father" again . . . for the elder son it means learning to say "brother" again.⁶ Repentance is crucial, in multiple directions, if we are to find our way and enjoy God's blessings in this life. But is repentance the precondition for grace? No. Grace comes first.

That's the way it is with God. And if that is true, then might not that truth inform the way we relate to others? We need not always be self-righteous older brothers and sisters, disdainful of those who live by different codes or creeds. We need not be that way at all, individually, or as a community, or as a people. We need not always resent a prodigal's return. What if we were actually to become the magnanimous and gracious people we consider ourselves to be? Might not we have more influence on the world stage by being generous, and open? On this Cuba Sunday, might it not inform the number of prerequisites we lay out for being in a normalized relationship with our Cuban sisters and brothers? Might it not lead us to adopt an open posture of gracious welcome toward the Cuban people, and toward all the refugees, asylees and other strangers who come our way? Might not that win for us a better reputation on the world stage? Might it not also be the right thing to do?

Well, back to the more personal dimensions. Some years ago, I heard a story on NPR that reinforced for me the belief in the primacy of grace. Michael Garofalo told the story on "Morning Edition" about a young New York City social worker named Julio Diaz. Garofalo reported that Diaz customarily followed the same routine each evening, ending his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night a few weeks earlier, as Diaz stepped off the 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

⁴ Gomes, 237-238.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and demanded his money. So, Diaz gave the boy his wallet. But as his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, “Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you’re going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.”

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, “Why are you doing this?” Diaz replied: “Well, if you’re willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner... and [hey,] if you want to join me ... you’re more than welcome.” “I just felt maybe he really [needed] help,” Diaz said. Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Within moments the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, the waiters came by to greet him. Diaz said, “The kid was like, ‘Man, you know everybody here. Do you own this place?’”

“No,” Diaz replied, “I just eat here a lot.”

The boy responded, “But you’re even nice to the dishwasher.”

“Well, haven’t you been taught you should be nice to everybody?” Diaz asked him.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think people actually behaved that way,” the boy said.

The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. “He just had almost a sad face,” Diaz said. He couldn’t answer — or he didn’t want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, “Look, I guess you’re going to have to pay for this bill, because you have my money, and I can’t pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I’ll gladly treat you.”

The teen “didn’t even think about it” and handed over the wallet, Diaz said. “So, I gave him \$20 ... I figured maybe it would help him....” But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife.⁵

Sometimes, friends, grace so astonishes us that all we can do is change course. All we can do is repent... turn around... see the world afresh. There are times, I know, when repentance seems to come first. But look closely, and more often we will find that it works the other way around. In fact, grace, once demonstrated and experienced, can change everything about us. Everything.

⁵*Morning Edition*, March 28, 2008, as reported by Michael Garofalo.