



There Was a Man
Who Had Two Sons



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons
2 Corinthians 6:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Ernest Hemingway begins one of his short stories with what he calls a well-known joke in the city of Madrid. It seems that a father had been looking all over Spain for his son, who had left home after a big argument. The father inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA.

When the father arrived at the hotel on Tuesday at noon, there were 800 young men milling around out front, every one of them named Paco. (“The Capital of the World,” Ernest Hemingway)

Whoa! If, as Hemingway says, this is a joke, it’s the kind of joke that makes us laugh to keep from crying. My heart aches for all those Pacos, and for the countless numbers of people longing for forgiveness; not to mention the countless numbers longing to forgive someone lost to them and welcome that one back into their life. Maybe they don’t know how. Or maybe they’ve tried, even with a personal ad in the paper, but had no luck.

We may not have experienced as dramatic a breach in a relationship as the young men and their fathers in Hemingway’s story, or in Jesus’ parable this morning. But we are as much in need of grace and reconciliation, in our world today and even in our own lives, as when those stories were first told, in the first century and early in the twentieth.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. What sound of grace does the younger son in Jesus’ parable hear out in the field? What sound of grace that lead him home? The sounds of the pigs oinking, snuffling, chewing. The insistent growling of his own empty stomach. Maybe the sound of his father’s prayers has reached him here in this distant country, so that at last he can hear the sound of his own inner voice telling him what a fool he’s been, and worse. For him, the sound of hitting bottom is pure grace. Desperation brings him to his senses and gives him the courage to turn and return.

Tradition has named this the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the extravagantly wasteful, reckless son. Some have wondered whether this prodigal is really repentant. Is he ready to take responsibility for the outrageous things he has done and the deep, probably unforgivable, hurt he has caused? Or is he still looking out only for himself; if not looking for a good time, turning for home hoping only for enough to eat and a roof over his head?

Here's the amazing thing: whichever it is, repentance or self-interest, it doesn't matter! Not to the father! What we have here is the Parable of the Extravagantly Compassionate and Generous Father. The sound, and the silence, of amazing grace and wondrous love. The father runs out to meet him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. Calls for a robe, a ring, shoes for his feet. And throws a party.

No questions asked. No punishment given. No penance demanded.

I don't know about you, but I still remember quite clearly my father, waiting up for me at night and chewing me out when I came home five minutes after my curfew: "I don't start worrying at one minute past midnight, I start worrying at midnight! You're grounded!"

There's a wideness in this father's mercy, and a *wildness*—like the wildness of the sea; like the wildness of the mercy of God.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "if anyone is in Christ, new creation. . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . ." By "reconciliation" he doesn't mean calculating who owes what to whom, like balancing accounts or a checkbook, who owes what to whom. This is about relationship, grace, forgiveness. And like the parable, it can shatter our carefully constructed and held notions of what is fair, what is right.

Which brings us to the other son, the older brother. You may have noticed that he has been absent from the story after the first sentence. Now he stumbles onto, and over, the unwelcome news that the good for nothing little brother who broke their father's heart is back and Dad has thrown him a party. To the responsible ear of the first born son, the sounds of music and dancing coming from the house—his father's house, his house, the one the other son walked away from with quite a lot of cash—signal not grace but outrage.

We are now in the Parable of the Really, Really, Angry, Resentful Older Brother. "What about me?!" It's not fair. It really is not. But his reaction is so, so human; so like us; so like me.

But it is not about fair. And it is not about me.

You see the problem. Here he is, the older son, the big brother—and maybe, sometimes, here we are—standing outside, mired in anger and resentment. He is focused on himself and what he deserves. In his own way, he disrespects his father, as his brother has done before him. He disavows his brother, calling him "this son of yours." In doing so, he distances himself from his father. Now he is the one who is lost, refusing to come in, cutting himself off from father and brother, from rejoicing, from new life.

And yet, the extravagantly compassionate, loving, merciful, generous father *has come out*, again, for the older son as earlier for the younger. He comes out to plead with and comfort him, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." *Come home.*

I don't know about you, but I have been in the shoes of both these sons, both these brothers. I have said things that have broken relationships to pieces. Not always in anger, sometimes thoughtlessly more than deliberately. Maybe out of hurt, like the older son here, or trying to protect myself. But like both sons, thinking more about myself than the other; wearing the very same shoes as they have been wearing here.

So I can't judge either of them. That might feel like a safe place to stand, but it would miss the stronger and possibly unsettling pull of the story, which is the father's unconditional love, his fully welcoming both his sons, wayward, thoughtless, resentful, stubborn though they may be.

How generous he is, and also how wise. Imagine for a moment how the story would play out if the father had agreed with his younger son that he was not worthy to be treated as his son. Imagine that he took him back as a servant not a son. And imagine how things would go if he were to tell his older son, "You'd better go in there and celebrate with us, or else!"

The younger son would convince himself that he was working off his huge, unforgivable debt, *earning* his father's love and forgiveness. The elder could take the "or else" and convince himself that he does well to be angry and his hard work has *earned* him his father's love and recognition—love and recognition he already has, but cannot see, maybe because he has thought all along that it's the work he does himself that makes him deserve love and recognition.

Whoa, again! Grace is *grace, all grace*, freely given in love, undeserved, unearned. It's hard to get that through our heads; maybe it will sink into our souls, if we will let it.

The end of the parable is wide open. There's the father's tender, compassionate plea to come in, come home, join the party, celebrate, be joyful. And then what? We don't know. That's the brilliance of it. Maybe these two sons, who are so thoroughly surrounded, saturated and supported by their father's tender compassion, will start to catch on. Maybe they won't. We can't know. This isn't a novel or even a short story, but a parable.

But, with a push or pull from this parable, we *can* catch on, if we will.

We do not, cannot earn God's boundless compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love. The only thing for it is to receive it, the enormity of it, sit with that awhile, let it sink in; and then give the same in return, share it around.

We are ambassadors for Christ, standing in his place wherever we are, given the ministry of reconciliation in a world that is sorely in need of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Who is lost to us, missing from our life? For whom is our presence and welcome missing, as if we were far off in a distant country? Whom might we have left standing outside the door? In our city, our county, neighborhood, maybe even in our own family?

Reaching out might be risky. We might be rebuffed, feel foolish. But God is always with us. Like the two sons in the parable, we are surrounded, upheld, saturated with God's love and compassion. This is the well from which we draw, not for our own sake but for the good and well-being of the other, especially our brothers and sisters in need of compassion, love, and generous welcome.