

Sermon for Leaside United Church on September 23, 2007
Rev. John G. Smith

“Grace is Waiting for You”

Based on the Prodigal Son story in Luke 15
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When I was young, my family rented a cottage every summer on Rice Lake. It was a pretty basic place, but home to many fond childhood memories. The year that I turned 7, we planned to spend a couple of weeks at this same place. It was bucolic. The weather was perfect, and it was my intention that year to learn how to swim. The dock at the water's edge protruded quite a bit out into the lake, and the water there was quite deep, so that people could dive off the end of the dock without fear of hitting bottom.

One particular day, my brother Terry, who is 5 years older than me, was sitting with me on the end of the dock, and we were dangling our feet in the water, splashing each other. At some point, I lost my balance and slipped into the cold waters of the lake.

I did not know how to swim, and I think I was so stunned from the initial impact, that my brain didn't seem to kick into gear as quickly as it might have. I didn't know enough to try to push up off the bottom, and besides it was very deep there. I didn't know enough to struggle to reach the surface, so for a little while I was totally immersed in the water. I was suspended there, unable to breathe, but still, not really knowing what was happening. Sort of like baptism of infants. The children are immersed in our faith, not knowing that is what we are doing, yet perhaps experiencing it at the level of the heart.

The Zen master says: “every moment that we are aware of the gift of simply being, is a moment well-lived.” (C. Ingram)

I like to remember thinking that I was an octopus, waving my arms and legs in the water as some kind of game. I was not afraid. In fact, I had a very significant insight, which I still remember with absolute clarity, to this day. I remember the feeling of warmth coming over me (and I know what you're thinking and it wasn't that!), and a pulsing energy flowing through me and around me. It was very odd. But I knew, even then, in my little 7 year old heart, that I was deeply loved. I was deeply blessed. I was deeply *alive*.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that I was really almost gone, and that I was probably experiencing what some people call a near-death experience, though I have never thought of it like that. Simply, I felt a warm pulsing love in the centre, in the core of my being.

Many times over the course of my life, when I have felt down, or lonely, or confused, distressed, or battered by the outer world, I have sought the retreat of

that moment in the water, suspended between life and death, knowing that in the core of my being, I am deeply loved, I am deeply beloved. **That one belief** has often been enough to carry me through; it has been the light that has guided me home. It has been the source of joy and the gift of assurance. You might not think so to look at me, but I have faced quite a few challenges in my half-century of life. Deaths of significant people, unexplainable illnesses, depression, poverty, burnout, parenting dilemmas, to name a few.

But I have never felt lost.

Fred Craddock once said::

There is no tragedy quite like being lost.

There is no joy quite like being found. (F. Craddock)

It is a matter of family myth and lore as to why my older brother did not simply pull me out of the water that day. Honestly, I have used that to my advantage, though I know he would have been unable to have done it. Instead, he ran screaming and yelling up to the cottage to get help, crying and yelping like a dog, according to the legend. My sister, 8 years older, ran down to the dock, jumped in the water, pulled me out, and started doing some crude form of resuscitation on me. I'm telling you, this was one of the **worst** moments of my life. Not so much the CPR, but the choking and gagging, the grasping for breath, the real fear then that I might not make it.

My Mom came running with a blanket and wrapped me up in it. She kissed and kissed and kissed my face, as did my brothers and sister, and it seemed to me that virtually all the neighbours came down to the water, and they laid their hands on me.

THAT was a huge moment of insight, though of course I didn't have this kind of language at the time to describe it. That was the moment when I felt on the outside what my heart, my spirit, my soul, already knew on the inside. When my family showered me with kisses, and all the neighbours put their hands on my quivering little body, it was GRACE.

Utter, sheer, unrefined GRACE. It was sacramental!

Grace cannot be manufactured or staged, or ritualized.

Grace cannot be expected, or assumed to be an entitlement.

Grace cannot be bought with all the money in the world.

It is simply the entrance of God into our lives, expanding our hearts, a free gift, bundled up with deep mercy, forgiveness, and love.

The gift of grace changes us from the inside out.

It gives us the sense that we are found, no matter where we are.

It lets us know, we always belong to God, we are never truly lost, and we are really just one breath away from it.

Atheist: If there really is a God, may he prove himself by striking me dead right now!

Nothing happened.

“You see, I told you so, there is no God!”

Friend: “On the contrary, you have just proved that God is a gracious God.”

I imagine that something awakened in the heart of the prodigal son as he threw away every last piece of his strict Jewish upbringing, spending his inheritance, and ending up eating with pigs. No Jew could hear this story without being totally disgusted. He had turned his back on his family, spent the money given to him unwisely, and disavowed his parent’s faith by eating breaking kosher food laws. However, my guess is that, by this time, the young man was nearly dead anyway. Certainly, from the point of view of his Jewish family, he was already “dead to them”. I imagine the young man thinking: even if I have to sleep in the barn on my father’s estate, I’ll be happier than I am now. I imagine that he expects to be punished severely; he’ll be lucky to get bread and water; he’ll be lucky to get some old clothes from his older brother; he’ll be lucky if all he has to wear is ashes of disgrace, and walk on his knees as a symbol of his repentance; he’ll be lucky if his father even recognizes him as his own.

I imagine that the older brother thought the very same things of the young prodigal.

But the father does not disown the son.

In fact, he disgraces himself.

No elderly man would ever consider lifting his garment and running in public.

This was not done.

No man of his stature would forgive so readily this wayward boy, because it would set a bad example to the neighbours and his other farmhands. No one would respect him after that.

Not even the elder brother, out working in the field would have expected what he saw when the prodigal returned.

The father ran to the gate, threw his arms around the boy, and (not easily understood in the English translations) kissed him and kissed him and kissed him. Then he called for the fattest calf to be prepared for a feast; he put a ring on the young boy’s finger, and gave him a brand new robe to wear.

The young boy discovered what most of us can’t seem to grasp:

Grace is already waiting for you.

Grace is waiting at the gate, looking each day to see if you are coming.

Grace is lying awake at night, concerned for your welfare, your wellbeing.

Grace is waiting to surround you with love, not in the future, **but now**, for the kingdom of God is NOW. It has arrived, this parable proclaims. It has arrived, and YOU are the welcomed guest.

If this is true, and if God is really like this,
then why are **we** so lost in our world?

Why are we seeking worth and value outside of our hearts and spirits?

Why are we spending, literally spending our lives, in the pursuit of happiness or fulfillment, or the gathering in of more stuff?

Why are we seeking our true life outside of the realm of God, outside of the life Christ showed us we could live?

Perhaps it is because we have not yet made the story our own?

Does the story of Jesus resonate deep in our hearts?

Does God's grace and mercy seem remote from your life, too remote to be bothered with it?

Or is it because in our day, we are all "masters (and mistresses) of our own domain"? We see ourselves as creators of our own lives, creators of our fate, managers of our life and our death. Who needs God then?

Indeed, who needs grace?

What I have found, is that even in the darkest moments of life, when we have lost our job or our spouse or our home, when I've done something truly awful to someone else, especially someone I profess to love, (as Martin Luther often thought: he saw himself as lower than the worms in the ground!)

when we have gone as far away from our faith, our family, our upbringing, as we possibly can,

GOD INITIATES. God initiates with grace.

It is simply a matter of "metanoia", of turning, adopting a change in heart or hope or hearing, in order to see the situation with new eyes.

God waits for us and with us through life's most difficult times.

Like the waiting father, God has never stopped looking out for us, even though we may have repudiated everything he stood for, and squandered away all that he has given us.

Salvation is grace, experienced in the now.

It is not some future gift, but a present "charis", a blessing of the spirit that lives in us.

In our lives, in our families, in our workplaces, in our church family, we are all in process of becoming what we truly are.

But the truth is, we are never quite there, yet we are always “almost” there.

However another truth is:

We are immersed in God’s grace each day, suspended in a sea of unending care.

Perhaps **this** is the joy that gave rise to the party when the prodigal returned. It was HIS joy, HIS surprise, HIS disbelief, HIS undeserving-ness, HIS receiving of the gift of mercy and grace.

The young prodigal son wasn’t lost anymore.

He FOUND himself, when he let the waiting father warm his heart with grace, and release the truth of his being in his own mind, body and spirit.

On this baptism Sunday, the first of many for me and for David,

I would wish this very thing for your children.

I would wish this very thing for you parents and you grandparents.

I would wish this very thing for each of you in this congregation.

I would wish that you find God’s love deep in your heart.

For, as I said earlier:

**There is no tragedy quite like being lost;
there is no joy quite like being found.**

May it be so!