

The Church's Message for the World

"A Community of Grace"

*From the Sermon Series:
How are we perceived as Christians and what can our faith offer the World?*

Readings: Luke 15:11-24 (NIV)

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

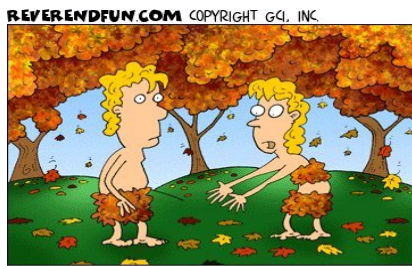
"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Good morning and very warm welcome to you all, especially to anyone who might be new here today. We are gladdened by you being with us today.

Well, this has nothing to do with the sermon, but some funnies to start us off before we get serious!



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ANOTHER ESKIMO BAPTISM GONE BAD



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LEPERS ... I HEAL LEPERS

So... for those who might be new here today, we are in the midst of a seven week series. Last week, I painted a rather bleak picture of how we are viewed by those who are wary of Christian things. But that does not mean, that I am bleak about how we can respond. I am hugely optimistic, because I think the message of Jesus is hugely relevant to the questions and needs of the twenty first century, and so over these next three Sundays, we are going to look at three aspects of this message which we as a church can offer the World, with the first being, Grace, in my mind the most beautiful word in the English language.

Bono lead singer of U2 says this about discovering Grace.....

You see, at the center of many religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace..... Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. – Bono

My son did some stupid stuff when he was three. He picked up some soap which was made in the shape of a strawberry. I told him it was soap and not a strawberry. He looked at me, then turned and walked away into another room. I warned him again and he walked further away from me into a room even further away than the first. I shouted this time, because he was now out of my sight and almost out of my hearing (I was in the toilet in case you are wondering why I just didn't go and get it him!). I called in desperation, but by now he had bitten into the strawberry soap. The consequence of this was a sudden panic from the other room. And then a cry for help, "Daddy" as he realized very quickly that his action, which could have been avoided if he had listened to me, had brought consequences into his life. Mattie ran back to me and by then I had finished in the toilet, so I gave him a huge hug and helped

him clean up, work through his decision he had made. He knew I had become engaged in his suffering with my love and because of that he knew he was safe to work things through.

Now if this story is in some way a picture to help us understand Grace at work, then we need to understand that with Grace, Christ offers to enter into my situation, offers to redeem the situation. It's a bit like Dominoes when they are all in a line, and someone touches one and then they all fall over one by one. If I use that as a picture, Grace, in contrast to Karma, steps in as surely as if I place my hand into the falling line of dominoes and makes the dominoes sequence stop. Grace, as a spiritual law, stops the situation getting worse, offers a context to recognize there is another way, engages God's power to redeem the situation.

I guess most of us have chosen at different times in our lives, to go our own way. The pattern has not changed since the time of Adam and Eve. God warns us through the Bible of the spiritual, physical and emotional laws that govern the universe; we chose not to listen and go further away from him, so that we can shut out that voice that is calling deep into our psyche. In fact the story from the reading in Luke, is about a young man who loses something of his humanity, because he is not willing to listen. I am not going to go into this story deeply, as I know many of you already know it, but for those who don't, there is a father who has two sons. The younger son decides to leave his father with his inheritance (Luke 15:12). This was unheard of in a Jewish culture. Anyway, the son goes off to a far off country (v.13), squanders the wealth due to his wild life style and bad decisions, and suddenly one day realizes that his life is meaningless and messed up (v.14). He decides to return to his father, say sorry for the way he has hurt his father, and beg him for another chance (v.17). His father, who is already waiting to welcome him back, embraces him, forgives him and helps the younger son find life again (v.20).

Now this parable, known often as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, stands as a picture for God as Father, and the son as humanity and in the parable of the son and the father, *"we see a picture of God the Father who is full of Grace reach out to you and me, not as an angry God, a vengeful God, a distant God, but as one who is pained at the separation; pained because he sees those whom he has created and whom He loves, you, me and the many others who do not believe in him, mess up what could have been a very beautiful world. The son in the parable, His repentance (his change of heart to go back) is the necessary means by which the son is able to benefit from the father's love*

again. But the father's love is not conditional upon the repentance for even before the son has returned, we remember the father was willing his son home. The love of the father is already there, just waiting for the son to re-discover it and so the picture given to us, is that the tool that this powerful God has allowed Himself to reach us with is love.

Religion has often complicated that simple message, but at its core, that is the message we can offer to those who have a perception of us being UnChristian. So let us apply what we have reflected from my story about Matt and also apply the story in the passage about the father and the son, back into our original question for today which is: *"What can the Church offer?"*

In answer, I suggest "A Community of Grace". because if I was asked to use a word to describe our society (one word), I would use 'alienation'; an alienation from self, neighbor and God due possibly to two things. The legacy of the scientific era perhaps has been two-fold: the unprecedented ability to take things apart in order to understand them (positive), alongside a significant inability to put them back together again (negative)." (Adrian Newman). Alongside that has been the growth of a consumer society which has grown a society that is often plagued by addiction: whether that be from drugs, alcohol, work, consumerism, sexual experiences, power and control. Because of these two phenomena, many find there is no sense of synchronicity in their lives and because of it, there a search again for authentic relationship, belonging, purpose and surprisingly, a profound quest for a spiritual dimension. *"It may not be called religion, but the search is back for an authentic Community of Grace, where a rediscovery of the original Christ can be discovered to help in that search."* In the words of Lewis Smede, professor of psychology at Fuller Seminary in explaining the need for communities of Grace, *"what I need more than forgiveness is a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me and would never let me go, even if He was not too impressed with what he had on his Hands at times. (Knowing that helps me find my way again)."*

A community of Grace offers people a safe place, an oasis in life for people to ask questions, lick their wounds, and discover the Christian message of redemption. It is about saying come as you are, just be with us and take as much time as you need to figure things out. It is about blessing people by how we speak, in how we act, in what we do at St George's, and letting God be God with the person. In time, some who have found a safe place for their questions, may choose to join the journey we are on, because they have experienced:

Grace, that sense of welcome, acceptance as the son in the parable did. They will join us, because they find we are not inward looking, but passionate about making the world a better place, and having stayed with us for a while, they may choose to discover Christ for themselves and in time become followers of Christ; thus in turn finding from saying 'yes', the full weight of the Kingdom of God begin to flow into their lives....so that they come to know, not only in an eternal sense, but in the now, comfort, peace, meaning, purpose. But because they know they are loved without an agenda by us, they will be able to take time to decide that journey of exploration for themselves and even say, like the prodigal son did initially 'no' for God's love, is one that is so profound, that it is even open to being taken advantage of.

In ending, Dennis Potter, the playwright once described God *"as the feeling of there being something to sing and dance about."* That's what we wish for St George's, that people who are un-churched can come here and find again how to sing and dance, find a new way of seeing things, because all of us once were blind, but can begin to see again. Back to Andrea's pray from the German theologian, Brueggeman, for us as a church, May we Oh God, as we seek your new vision together, be given a "A truly prophetic imagination to see and express the alternative reality we seek to live by so that others might come to know you for themselves." A Community of Grace that allows you and me... and others to see in a new way! Amen.